The Midwestern Book of the Dead

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Chapter One: Awakenings

I.

Up from black and wormy earth made soft by nine days of heavy rain, Herbert “Fuzzy” Dice let himself back into his childhood home.

“All the science I don’t understand about it,” sang Fuzzy’s mom, Helen, high as a kite might have been. She was quoting her favorite song. Fuzzy’s dad, in fact, had been nicknamed Rocket Man by her. If only because he came and went in a flash. Years ago, he went on a cigarette run. Presently he was in a different part of the world. If he appeared right in front of her, she would have trouble placing him at first. For their tenth anniversary he gave her a STD and a fat lip. Still, it was an excellent song.

A woman given over to gauzy recollections of familial gatherings, Helen Dice had thought for at least half a minute that the Rocket Man had returned from parts unknown.

“I can smell you, bitch, before I see you,” she said to the intruder that she assumed was her ex. She was invoking her superpower presently, that of an extraordinary sense of smell. Everybody had a superpower, Helen Dice realized, if only they could believe in it enough to cultivate it. It wasn’t much of

a superpower granted, a superhuman sense of smell, but it was better than nothing. Like a dog, she could sense invisible presences simply through their scent trail. She was constantly surprising her friends and coworkers with this ability. She was constantly sniffing at the air like Buck in *The Call of the Wild*. She was constantly on the defensive against those who scoffed at the ability.

The Rocket Man, she recalled, had a vague bacterial odor like a filthy gym sock run through the wash one time too little.

“When you bathe,” Helen yelled at him, still supine on the bed after her latest meth journey, “you make sure you rinse off then soap up again. Either that or bring a bottle of formaldehyde into the fucking tub with you, motherfucker,” she said. “You require a masking agent,” she told him. “Never mind your fucking physical well-being! You need something that kills bugs dead! And I’m serious about this as I’ve never been serious about anything else,” she said. “You rinse off then soap up again next time. Bitch. And by the way who said you could come in anyway?”

Unbeknownst to her the door to her Delacorte, Iowa cape cod was wide open. It had been open since eight that morning when, perceiving the presence of an imaginary cat, Helen had invited it to leave at its leisure.

“You’re really gonna make me come in there, huh?” she said to the olfactory presence in Fuzzy’s old bedroom. If only out of respect for her own grief, she had not changed the sheets on her son’s bed since his passing. To her, the entire room was a shrine that was being violated by this filthy gym sock of a human’s continuous presence. At a more composed moment she would have fetched the mason jar of gasoline she insisted on keeping on one shelf in the garage for what she termed a rainy

day and rendered an impromptu purification of the room. It was just the way meth-heads of her stripe tended to think. Which was to say, impulsively and inaccurately. Ten minutes from now she would rise from her semi-stupor to confront Rocket Man one-on-one. She was genuinely outraged that he had returned. He thought at the very least he should have sent condolences at word of Fuzzy's death. She always held out for the possibility that he was dead too.

Once in his old bedroom, Fuzzy had attempted to climb back in his old race car bed that he had not slept in since he was eleven.

"*Frithah shemtre akra*," he said to himself.

Perhaps finding the words only semi-incomprehensible, he awkwardly began to insinuate himself between formerly clean sheets. He had the thin plastic shoes on that the undertaker had fitted him with to save money on burying a real pair. They were basically hollowed out polyurethane slip covers. And when they interacted with the bed's cotton sheets, they tore at the fabric as if they were rodents. They were possessed of serrated edges as their Taiwanese manufacturer had not calculated into their design profile somebody moving in them. Even now on the inside they were rendering deep cuts into suddenly animate flesh.

Of course, this was the least of Fuzzy's problems. Being an abomination of nature tended to make a man seem less sympathetic to others by degrees. Presently he could have cradled a golden retriever puppy in his blackened hands while warbling a K-pop classic, but folks would still have recoiled in horror. He was not meant to be here, to be alive. And the explanations as to why he was here would only grow more worrisome.

Admittedly, Herbert Dice hadn't been the most endearing sort before his first death. This should be

mentioned, though it was likely irrelevant to the current crisis. Dude had a mean streak in him and a taste for illicit substances just like mom. None of the t-shirts he owned were in possession of sleeves. You get the picture. A prominently displayed item, he, in Hillary Clinton's Basket of Deplorables. A less politically sensitive sort would have labeled Fuzz "trailer trash." Even though he had never lived in a trailer in his life. Even though he was in possession of a 130 IQ and listened to classical music whenever he was in possession of a reliable internet connection.

He had a welding business that went tits-up when the local agribusiness concern took off for Mexico in 2007. From then on days were spent at odd jobs and the local bar. He had a vague notion of himself as victim of an international conspiracy. He read *The Turner Diaries* but found it lacking in literary value. He never did put a name to the feeling of helplessness. He felt, regardless, he was deserving of more.

"You always was a bum, just a strange ghost. Now ya a bum with presence," Fuzzy's mom told this person she imagined Fuzzy to be (Rocket Man) from the other room.

Fuzzy didn't know what to make of such an utterance. His brain was not functioning so well just then. He didn't know if he was being prompted to respond, or if he was even capable of a response. He didn't think he had any right to reply. He didn't know what to say.

Merely he knew of the moment's desire to rest. As if being dead was a truly exhausting ordeal, akin to running a marathon. He was cold constantly despite his circulating blood and water-logged because of the ceaseless rain he had been exposed to during the past few hours. He wanted to be in bed and be afforded of the dry warmth that bed

provided. It was strange perhaps that in-animacy could prove so taxing, but he was living proof of it. If allowed to sleep, he would do so in this undersized bed for twenty straight hours. At which point he would begin to retest his motor reflexes by strolling around Helen's tiny backyard in search of carrion to munch on.

Only upon reviving had he developed a taste of dead putrescent flesh. He didn't know it yet, but he had been transformed into something that politically incorrect types would label monstrous. He wasn’t so pleasant to look at anymore nor never would be. This didn't mean that he lacked a soul. Or that any person possessed one to begin with.

We love our monsters here in America only in the abstract. We thought they were apart from us but also of us. Apart in the sense that a true democracy necessarily elevated every low-living man and woman to the status of a Silicon Valley grandee. Americans would love monsters in this distant way only if the American media gave lip service to certain verities aimed at preserving the political status quo. A version of events needed to be concocted in which even a type of high-functioning zombie (which Fuzzy Dice must surely now be considered, no matter how well-mannered he might act in the future) could one day rise to the presidency. He was one of us, so to speak, even as we recoiled from him in horror. Full civil rights must be granted even as medical benefits were denied. And the ADA must be promptly expanded to cover the needs of the Undead.

On the other hand, so many rural Midwesterners nowadays, ordinary folk, independent of being resurrected, were already, as the saying goes, fucked. For example, this state’s health care system that had once made provisions to keep addicts like Helen Dice off meth, was falling apart. No addiction

treatment facility would presently accept the insurance she had been made to purchase through the public exchanges once COBRA had proven too expensive to pay into. She had a notion to get herself arrested if only to take advantage of the excellent drug treatment regimen Iowa afforded its inmates. Maybe something non-violent. But also, something that might be enough to guarantee at least a ninety day stay in the pen. She thought she needed that much time to dry out. She thought maybe a breaking-and-entering or, if worst came to worst, she set somebody's house on fire. She was and always had been utterly entranced by fire. She thought she would have made a good arsonist if she ever had her shit together long enough to study for the diploma involved.

Which was to say that after encountering her once buried son rolling around in formerly clean sheets, neither Helen nor any of her put-upon neighbors would be so overwhelmed as to faint dead or run screaming from the house in terror to the closest house of worship. She like them had real problems in a region with real problems. So many of them had undergone an involuntary toughening process to the point that little phased them. Was this the beginning of the end for the Late Great Planet Earth? Bring it on! Helen Dice would have agreed with this sentiment just before reaching into the frayed pink bathrobe that she received all visitors in nowadays for a smoke. She assumed that which was going to happen could hardly be worse than that which already was. Likely this was not accurate, but she and so many others like her believed it. It lent to their everyday proceedings the sort of fatalism usually reserved for denizens of third world countries. It made them all ironists of their own experience wherein nothing was to be believed in completely. It made them think nothing

was real (to the extent that nothing ever lasted). The good earth absorbed the dead once and would do so again. Fuzzy's resurrection was a black swan event. It was all very natural in a strange way. It provided faith that everything would go back to normal if only things were allowed to play out to the nth degree.

When Helen finally had gathered her wits enough to discover the real identity of the interloper in the other room, her more or less sober first response to seeing her son returned from the dead was to complain loudly about the mess he was making in the otherwise pristine room.

"Them sheets ain't cheap, bucko," she told Herbert then moved in slowly for a better view of the on-going miracle in front of her. She felt whatever celestial providence was on display had been slightly besmirched by the mess that was being created. When (and if) Christ had recalled Lazarus from the army of the night, He would have done so pristinely. She had always imagined the scene (in the rare moments in her life when her mind turned to Bible stories), executed with a mere flash of light as time flowed backwards locally and a winding sheet was spontaneously unwound like the string around a sewing spindle having toppled to the floor. Lazarus would have arisen easefully as a helium balloon rising from an un-clutched fist. He would find himself in so many ways better off for the journey. The fact that he would be filthy from the grave, wholly putrescent resultant from his flesh's previously inert state, never entered either Helen's or the authors of the Gospels reckoning of such events. Lazarus, had he really been awoken, might well have begged Christ to return to the sleep of death, seeing what he had been diminished to because of his awakening.

Perhaps the whole affair was merely a bit of religious propaganda aimed at the gullible. In the Christian story, after all, nobody had ever looked at Lazarus and found him wanting. He had been absorbed into the earth like all the rest. There was no record about what he thought or desired about his fate. This by itself was suspicious. In that at the very least mixed emotions should have been on display.

In real life, unlike in religious myths, there were often more loose ends than tied ends.

“What’re you doing here?” Helen asked Fuzz when on her third take she had convinced herself who it was. No, this was no Halloween prank perpetrated by one of the monstrous layabouts of this town. Even back from the dead her boy was her boy. With her keen snout she could detect him infallibly. Furthermore, nobody could be that cruel to render such an impersonation to a grieving mother. As little as she paid attention to religious precepts, she thought it was sacrilege of the highest order for one of these young drunks who hung around downtown Delacorte to dress up like Fuzzy and assume a zombie-like demeanor. This was after stealing into his childhood bed merely to scare the shit out of his poor mom. Even for them it was going too far. It must have been an *authentic* illusion, therefore, a product of her hitting the pipe too hard. But lonely old women could engage their figments to whatever level was necessary to gain comfort from the interaction. Helen knew exactly who she was looking at under the slowly twisting sheets even as she suspected that he was not really there. This was no contradiction in terms for a denizen of this part of the Midwest. Folks out here were fucked royally. Many out here were potential Trump voters, even the ones who publicly proclaimed distaste for the New York businessman’s vulgar ways. Nobody

saw things as getting any better. Meth and booze and a lot of afternoon TV watching was ongoing. They all wanted change in some ill-defined way. But the poor educations so many of them had been subjected to had rendered them incapable of putting their feelings into words, let alone actions. So, they trolled for alternate states of consciousness constantly as a salve to their own bad moods. And when the fabric of reality twisted over itself into something resembling more nightmarish figment than truth, nobody in this neck of the woods admitted surprise. Some out here preferred nightmares to truth. They thought a nightmare's malleable nature gave them a better chance of changing it. Whereas truth was as granitic as the earth. It never changed. It was completely immune to human suasion. Men found hope, therefore, only in the retreat from truth, in wrapping themselves in the gauzy comfort of insane visions. The usefulness of nightmares resided in their subjective nature. It provided terror as a type of mother's milk. It made men conjure themselves at the center of something. Whereas truth suggested that all humanity was supremely negligible. It could be made to disappear without so much as a gravitational ripple. The universe was utterly unaware of humanity's presence.

Of Fuzzy Dice's arrival, over time Helen would admit nothing but joy. But presently she was gob smacked by his filthy state and the tendency that now seemed part of his new demeanor to avoid eye contact with an interlocutor at all costs.

"You're hung over, done something wrong maybe and come here to hide out," Helen said succinctly surmising the notions she held about her dead son's unexpected appearance. But, no, he had not been in jail or in the same Triangle House that a judge had sentenced him to after his latest DUI. He

had been six feet under exactly. Extinct, at Jesus' feet in heaven, plucking on a golden harp as the trihagion, the *holy, holy, holies* that supposedly emerged from a worshiper's mouth spontaneously while in God's presence, bubbled forth from his drink-calloused lips like endless vomit after a schnapps bender.

She didn't think he looked so bad all things considered. He still had the red thread in his eyelids appearing like a secondary set of lashes from where the cut rate Waterloo undertaker had sewn them shut. Worms had eaten some of the flesh of Fuzzy's cheeks and the lobe of one ear. But the beige pancake make-up that covered his exposed skin had helped greatly to disguise these flaws. A maggot at the edge of his left nostril was doing a little dance on the trestle of a curlicued nose hair. It almost seemed to be signaling to Helen Dice.

"Fuck you, anyway, hon," Helen Dice said to the maggot after taking its translucent form betwixt right thumb and forefinger and pressing down hard. Probably the maggot spoke no English. So, a physical gesture was required to make her disgust known. She assumed so many hundreds like it were on his son's person right now. These too would meet their maker in due course. Within the hour, she would decamp to the local True Value in search of delousing powder. And she would begin to ladle generous handfuls of the toxicant onto Fuzzy's body and the folds of his all too cheap suit bought merely for the occasion of his funeral.

She would at that point have gained sufficient perspective to be awed at her son's return. She would wish to contact a local authority figure if only to confirm.

It would not be a cop as she hated cops with ferocious passion owing to her semi-regular encounters with them while as a meth user. Rather,

jumping the gun somewhat, she called Nan Kramer, the local Unitarian minister.

She asked Nan after the proper etiquette in the face of a miracle. No, Fuzz had been truly dead, she said, not playing possum dead, but dead-dead. As in: a cause of death had been assigned. No, look, she told her: the county medical examiner had insisted on an autopsy owing to the so-called “mysterious circumstances” surrounding his demise. Herbert had hung himself in his room downtown with a handmade rope persistently stitched together out of found material over a period of weeks. He jumped off the kitchen chair and the rope pulled back and broke his neck between the second and third vertebrae. His spinal cord snapped, and his vital functions ceased (it was assumed) forever.

At the autopsy, the county M.E. cracked open Herbert’s chest and stuck a penlight inside the wound. He declared the death a suicide and gave the technical reason therein. It was the heart that stopped because of the severed brain connection. According to him, cause of death was cardiac arrest.

So, it was demonstrated.

“I ain’t fucking crazy and I ain’t been smoking...that much,” Helen said to “Rev. Nan” as she liked to be called. Helen and Nan knew each other from the weekly drug addiction support group meetings that had been run in the Delacorte Unitarian Church basement for the past seven years once the public funding for the endeavor had dried up. There was a lot of chattiness amongst the participants therein and only a little preachiness by Nan. Which was the way Helen liked it. She wasn’t a child. She didn’t need to be told drugs were bad for you. She liked her friends down there and she liked the way Rev. Nan laughed at the most off-color of jokes. All this made Helen think of Nan when it came

time to make a call. The cops likely would have come in with weapons drawn. To her, they were mere animals granted a license to kill. She didn't trust 'em as far as she could throw 'em. Which, given her current dilapidated state, was a small distance measured not with a ruler but a pencil tip.

An addict herself of pipe tobacco, Nan Kramer could be heard over the phone exhaling a smoky penumbra of Captain Black before offering Helen a bit of advice.

"The first thing I'd do," she said and paused a little while longer than necessary. "Well, now. The first thing I'd do is check and see if the son of a gun is still breathing." So, the oft presented filmic trick of holding a hand mirror under the nose was suggested by Rev. Nan. But, of course, this was hardly necessary.

"Been staring at him now for a fucking hour," Helen told her reverend. "He's been tossing and turning since he got here," she said. "And he ain't slowing down."

Indeed, minutes ago Helen Dice had been bold enough to place her palm flush against Fuzzy's forehead. He was cooler than a healthy human should have been, but warmer than a fucking dead guy. So, you could go ahead and put that in the win column, if that's the way you wanted to look at it. She was glad to see her boy again regardless of his physical state. He needed help. Therapy, surely, and perhaps surgery. She would make sure he received it. She assumed that his original death was a fraud perpetrated on the part of the county government. The county M.E. was a towelhead with connections to who knew what terrorist organization. He and his evil minions had stashed her boy somewhere after he had merely hurt his neck and stashed him somewhere else to perform illicit experiments on him. Al Qaeda or something like that was

underwriting the whole operation. But resilient as he always was, Fuzzy had escaped. Well, that was as likely as anything else in this affair. Helen necessarily didn’t believe in the stories relating to Jesus Christ’s powers. She believed deeply in conspiracies, however, and here it seemed was proof of another.

The Captain Black that Nan Kramer regularly inhaled regardless if she was inside an area designated for smoking, had the reputed effect of calming a body down. It let Nan keep her head while others lost theirs.

“It seems you’re the victim of something cruel and terrible,” Nan Kramer said to Helen Dice. Truth be told, she barely knew who Helen was. All these unfortunates of northern Iowa were of a piece to Nan. They were all nostalgic after an imaginary past of white picket fences and high paying jobs. Their parents had struggled as they were struggling now. But somehow the fantasy persisted of the benign past. As nostalgia was a form of derangement, it was hardly surprising when other forms of derangement reared up in townsfolk at the slightest provocation. Probably what Helen was seeing was one of the local boys having wandered into her dead son’s bedroom. He was in the midst of sleeping one off. Maybe he looked like her son passingly and there you have the confusion. Helen Dice’s faculties were not intact. To judge by her demeanor on the telephone, she was out of her mind. Which meant that she should be humored until she could be ignored.

Try to get her to come to her senses, Rev. Nan thought. If all else failed, she would call the cops herself. The social safety net was there for a purpose, wasn’t it? She didn't really give a damn about what Helen’s expressed wishes were in this matter.

Somebody was reaching out to the Rev. And the Rev. was doing her best to tend to a member of her community.

Having picked up strange mannerisms while dead, Herbie Dice inevitably would be misunderstood once resurrected.

“Hold up, Rev.,” Helen said to Nan after a prolonged silence between them. “He wants to talk to you. Listen,” she said, “he’s reaching at the phone. He wants to say something to you.”

Nan Kramer did not want to talk to this, um, person. She said this to Helen two seconds too late to forestall the phone handoff.

Suddenly there was a presence on the other end of the line that did not necessarily translate itself into any detectable vocalization. This presence seemed, as a result, desirous of having Rev. Nan break the ice.

“Hello,” she said to it/him/whatever and held her iPhone at a distance from her ear as if the device had mutated into some live animal and was about to start nibbling on her. Just before an answer came, Nan thought about how few human interactions were “normal” interactions nowadays. In the early twenty-first century, seemingly everybody was tense and batty, everybody had an axe to grind concerning the way things were versus the way they should be. People acted out and assumed deliberate disguises routinely. They were not themselves nor ever desirous of being themselves. A compassionate person had no choice but to simply deal with their shit patiently, to see things through their eyes until some sort of commonality dawned delicately like a tiny shoot bursting up from the ground. This shoot was suggestive of something far larger that could evolve perhaps eighty years later, but likely would die long before that.

If her conversation partner was about to launch a series of insults at her personally or make with the woman-hate, Rev. Nan would hang up on the SOB pursuant to driving over to Helen's house in her 83' station wagon and confronting this fellow about such statements. Nan held a brown belt in Wing Chun. She had the capacity, she believed, to become effectively violent in a pinch. The cosmos would not judge her negatively resultant from her actions. She thought she was possessed of a categorical imperative to defend the harmless from harm. Nan Kramer was a warrior beneath her vestments. She wasn't going to take guff from anybody, let alone a misogynistic freak.

She waited for a ragged inhalation of breath to conclude from the other end like an old-fashioned bellows being loaded.

"*I have a problem*," the voice eventually said, "*with discolored yellow teeth. I have a problem with bad breath. But Colgate is here to help*."

Pause. Then another. Eventually it was Nan Kramer's understanding that she was obliged to ask the presence to repeat what it was just said.

"*I have a problem*," the voice said, "*with discolored yellow teeth. I have a problem with bad breath. But Colgate is here to help*."

On Nan Kramer's desk there was an unopened bottle of twelve-year-old Chivas Regal next to a sequin applicator. *Bang, You're Fabulous* read the applicator on one side in indelible pen. Earlier that morning Nan had a notion to sequin her name on the back of a jean jacket. Now that was all beside the point.

The Chivas when it was finally cracked opened had proven too smooth a concoction to satisfy. Even at ten in the morning, Nan needed something altogether more baptismal-fiery. Something along the lines of Kentucky moonshine. She was drunk in

no time because of the Chivas's affectless nature. She was struggling for a rationale as to why she hung up the phone.

"I'm not nobody's fool," Rev. Nan declared to herself mightily as in her tiny wood paneled office she struggled to sequin a N. But in her plastered

state she merely drew a:

Which was a vulgar variant of the Phoenician *nun* whose Hebrew referent (and she knew this from her theological training) was meant to represent faithfulness or the reward for faithfulness. It had also been assumed by *goyim* like her to mean eternal life. But she could have been wrong about this. In its exalted state the letter received a godly crown. But this representation was far beyond her sequinning abilities. She was drunk on scotch and fearful that she had let Helen Dice down.

She knew Helen was in trouble. But for the longest time she couldn't understand how come. In fact, Nan's teeth were not yellow at all. A little on the gray side because of all the pipe smoke. But, after hearing all about it and what Colgate could do for her, Nan Kramer smashed her cell phone to pieces using well-honed Wing Chun techniques. She assumed her lack of faith was being tested in some very essential way. Which was an illogical thing to believe but nevertheless...

She felt that such an utterance was the exact sort of thing a newly resurrected person might say, absent of any coaching not to. By three that afternoon she was home in bed weighing the immorality of her inactions. Maybe she wasn't such a bad person deep down, merely fearful of the unknown. This was ridiculous as all get out. She felt

the need for a reset prior to continuing. She felt in need of help herself.

Finding bed to be an uncomfortable place when it was still light outside and the room was spinning, Nan Kramer padded off into the church lobby where a landline awaited further use.

“There’s something wrong over at one of my constituents,” Rev. Nan said to the local cop who answered her call. Referring to Helen, she used the chosen Unitarian term for a member of her flock: *constituent*. She thought it appropriate in this context. She also thought that something deeply strange had inserted itself into the world that quickly as it might needed to be reckoned with. She was convinced no ordinary prankster would go on about the need for Colgate toothpaste. It wasn’t something that would occur to an ordinary trickster even if he or she determined to startle someone on a whim.

The cop, on the other hand, seemed to be waiting for something more to be given to her before an escalation occurred.

“What do you think we should do about it?” the lady cop finally asked Nan Kramer.

It was a good question. Yet one that Nan Kramer was not prepared to answer.

“No guns, no violence,” she finally said and gently stated her fears. There was such a thing as real-life monsters. Now one of them was loose in Delacorte. If you were that sort possessed of faith in God, maybe what you would do is pray. But Nan Kramer didn’t say this to the officer. She simply repeated Helen’s address. This wasn’t a 911 call. Despite her distress, she didn’t believe the situation constituted an emergency. She thought somehow (and weirdly for her) it would work itself out for the best.

II.

When two patrol officers arrived, Fuzzy Dice was up in bed with feet placed flat on the floor. Or flat as possible, given the degree of warping and dirt clods inherent in the plastic shoes.

“You want something pal, you want maybe a doctor?” the more senior officer, Reynard Hedge, asked Fuzz even as he gagged slightly at the room’s smell. An animate corpse was something you didn’t see every day around here. But, then again, mere putrescence was nothing to panic over. Merely, officer Hedge thought, this was some dumpster-diving vagrant having out of desperation sought the warmth of indoors. Around here, usually the homeless behaved themselves. Usually there was no need for police to become involved in their lives any more than rousting them off Main Street whenever something that passed for a VIP visit in these parts was taking place. Usually, the city would open the gym of the local “Y” and let these bums mill about inside there for two hours, fulsome on the sugar rush that the donuts the cops sprang for provided. If they wanted to sleep on the gym floor in the meantime, they were allowed to sleep on the gym floor until the coast was clear. People were nice around here. They made accommodations for each other. The clerk who ran the Y knew all these homeless by name.

Officer Reynard Hedge had stopped trying to learn their names after his ninth year on the force. They were a relatively transient lot. Some of them had cleaned up or died or merely became gainfully employed which allowed them to rent a place. He had been told that many of them headed out to California where the homeless living was altogether easier than in northern Iowa. Regardless, he never asked after them anymore. He didn't think it was

any of his business. He thought for the most part they had earned the right of anonymity.

He knew the man in front of him was homeless. He knew it more by the man's refusal to make eye contact than by his superficial filth.

"It's the way they are, they're shy," officer Hedge told Helen Dice once isolating her in the cape cod's tiny kitchen. He did not appreciate being glared at by her in this way or being sniffed at as if she was part dog. But he felt somehow a desire to make a connection with this woman. By the time Hedge and his partner officer Hung had arrived on scene, Helen had apparently reconciled the man in front of her as some sort of visitation from the grave. Her son had died recently and so here she was seeing miracles where only social dysfunction existed. Officer Hedge had an intention to be tender with her up until a point. But he didn't appreciate her attitude with him and his fellow officer even slightly.

When they had first knocked on her door, Helen Dice refused to even open it for them, citing her "rights."

"We don't need a goddamned search warrant where there's a reasonable suspicion of a crime taking place," Hedge had told her citing the law as he understood it. Well, something like that anyway was in play just then. Moreover, he thought a woman living alone ought to have been glad after a prompt police response in what could properly be called a rundown neighborhood. She had something to hide possibly. Claimed she had a keen olfactory sense, but to Hedge this seemed just an ordinary bit of Midwestern eccentricity. Hedge had no intention of busting her balls about her off-putting behavior once he heard the story about her son. He thought she had suffered enough. Well, maybe she could suffer a little more if she kept on with the police

brutality meme. Reynard Hedge was a peace officer who protected and served at the behest of the people. He was not one of those dirty cops in Chicago or Ferguson, Mo. Even the graft that came his way was penny ante stuff. He had never taken a substantial bribe in his life.

Of the filthy subject in question, Hedge assumed the game plan would be for Helen to file charges against the vagrant prior to them hauling his ass away.

“If you ever want to have another moment’s rest,” officer Hedge told her after turning his back on the span of drug paraphernalia arrayed on her bedroom dresser, “you’ll go ahead with it.”

He was speaking of the complaint she needed to sign against Fuzz.

“You try to make a friend of this type and they’ll take you for everything they can once they got their hooks into you,” he said. “Seen it myself a dozen times,” he told her. “You think you’re doing good by being nice but you ain’t doing nobody no good like this. Dear,” Hedge told her, “you need to straighten up and fly right. I’m being super serious with you here,” he said. “There’s no use reliving the past like you seem to be doing. I don’t know what sort of lies the bum told you. But whoever’s son this guy is lives far away from here. Hopefully, she’s dead and can’t see what’s become of him. I don’t mind talking this way in front of him because he has no self-respect to begin with. If he wants to correct me at any point he can go ahead and issue the correction,” Reynard said staring right into Fuzzy’s downcast eyes. “But the point I’m making here is that he’s a criminal and you’re a victim of crime. And there’s no use of anybody here make believing that it’s not the case.”

In the bedroom’s corner, the Hmong-American police officer Gerald “G.I.” Hung stood at attention with his hands on his narrow hips. Out of deference

perhaps to Helen's confusion, he had not spoken since he had entered her dwelling. He had seen this sort of scene before in some variation. He hailed from an ancient and ghost-ridden culture. Furthermore, he knew what it meant for the world to end. At age seventeen, he was thrown on a boat not seaworthy enough to troll a local bay let alone cross the Pacific. The Vietnamese communists who had done it were every bit as dead-eyed as Fuzzy. So, he took the symptoms of Apocalypse more seriously than most. He assumed such events happened at a local level constantly.

For officer Hedge, this was a simple B and E, maybe with a resisting arrest thrown on top of it. As the mangy SOB on the children's bed wouldn't give him the time of day, Hedge intended to cuff him and direct G.I. Hung to place him in the back seat of their cruiser while he took Helen's statement. Hedge behaved as if he was Hung's boss, but he was not. He had explicitly denied the weird mystery in front of him. He was annoyed that others did not see the world through the same waxy lens that he saw the world exclusively.

To him, the problem was that Helen had no intention of providing a statement to the officers, let alone filing a complaint.

"I know my rights," she kept on telling them as if to invoke a talisman against harassment. On Hedge she smelled some sticky barbecue sauce eaten with his fricassee that afternoon. On officer Hung there was no scent at all to speak of. Which was intensely strange to her. It would have to be followed up on as time allowed.

To a veteran cop, saying you knew your rights was a dead giveaway. It marked you as somebody who absolutely did not know his or her rights.

"You give me any more lip lady, I'm fucking you over," Hedge told Helen at one point, exasperated

at her inability to call a spade a spade. He figured she was no legal genius, so he kept up with this willful desecration of the Bill of Rights. He thought he could bully her into filing charges eventually. He thought all this rough treatment was for her own good.

Rather than comply, Helen kept on telling the officer that the perp was her son Herbie back from the motherfucking grave. From the motherfucking grave! And that, therefore, the police had no jurisdiction in this matter. She kept on telling them to drive out to her son's overturned tombstone and see for themselves if they didn't fucking believe her. They weren't the goddamned Ghostbusters, after all. She knew her rights and she thought she knew the truth. Hedge told her if she kept it up somebody else was going to want to commit her to an insane asylum. He hadn't driven here to bust balls and never would think to do so to a grieving mother. But he knew a lunatic when he saw one. And if only for herself and her "son's" well-being, he felt she was obliged to tone it down. Enough people with enough authority in society declared you crazy, you're crazy by definition. Never mind what the absolute molecular truth of the matter might be. Helen, who obviously had scrapes with the law in the past, should realize this dark truth more than most. Society at the best of times was a half-functional machine that admitted no guilt toward the people it ground up on its gears. The obvious smart play was to keep one's eccentricities to oneself or only to those loved ones that one could trust in absolutely. "I know my rights," meant nothing to anybody with any power in the modern USA. If you knew enough to mouth the shimmering platitudes espoused in a civics class, you should probably know enough to realize that these platitudes were a thin exterior disguising something infinitely more vulgar. The

more you insisted on yourself as one with God, the more those with real power tried to beat you into the dirty ground for good.

One should, therefore, look on with sadness at all those powerless folks who insisted on their constitutional protections. But, because he was a high functioning imbecile, officer Hedge found many things simple and obvious. He thought Helen was a mere fool worthy of being bullied. He had no qualm about shoving her around to effect the best outcome for her.

“Maybe he got in a fight once or something back before he came here,” Reynard Hedge said to Helen of her supposed son once the matter of his prominent facial wounds was broached. At the back of Fuzzy’s neck there was a large bump where the spinal column had snapped in two. She pointed to it but Hedge just denied its presence. Maybe it was some huge cyst, nothing more. He didn’t know what he didn’t know, he said to her. He wasn’t a fucking doctor. Something like that.

He said that the evidence presented to him thus far was not enough to make him get down on his knees and pray to Sweet Jesus for forgiveness.

“What you’re saying makes no sense to anybody with a brain,” Reynard said to her, attempting to reach beyond his limited understanding of life. Then he said, “If he was dead, how’d he managed to come out here by hisself?”

As, according to Reynard Hedge, one of the true attributes of the dead was their inability to hitch a ride. To Hedge, the proposition was self-proving. He didn’t understand why so many people had such a hard time with so many things. He could teach a class on life. He could straighten the world out for good if he merely had been allowed to do so. Everything was so simple. There was no need to backtrack on your beliefs ever.

All throughout this convo, Fuzzy Dice sat on the soiled bed with his feet placed flat on the floor.

“Bub, listen,” Hedge said to him bending down and trying to make eye contact. “You can go out of here on your own recognizance, or you can go out of here being dragged on the ground like a batch of soiled laundry. Which is it today, d’ya think?” he said. “Which of these two alternatives strikes you as more dignified than the other?”

In his present state of decay, Fuzzy’s mouth did not function as efficiently as one would suppose it might ordinarily.

“*Shata fillius phatta refa*.”

This was a nonsense language Fuzzy Dice was intent on articulating, absent any practical need to do so seemingly.

“*Etra herte dety*,” he said to officer Hedge when suddenly seemingly convinced that he was obliged to respond. As his facial gestures and mannerisms were non-existent, there was no way to contextualize the utterance as meaning anything. It might have been a put on really. Which was why Helen was smiling just then. In the hour or so that he had been up, she had heard him speak English well enough and in the gravelly voice she remembered. All these utterances involved products aimed at body maintenance. Again, she thought this was all a joke. She thought that he was alive and relatively well and having fun with so many things including these pigs in front of her.

Every so often Fuzzy would cough up a giant beetle and stare at it lazily as it tried to right itself.

“He’s either dumb or stupid,” officer Hedge said and briefly as he might reached for his firearm. Usually such a gesture would prove so alarming to ordinary folk that he wouldn’t have to actually unholster it. In this case there was no recognition in the perp’s eyes that his life might be in danger.

Fuzzy's eyes followed the arc of Reynard Hedge's hand passively and when it dropped to his side his eyes dropped to his side along with it. As if this universal gesture promising retributive violence needed translation. As if he came from a country so devoid of anger or covetousness that the entire notion of aggression was foreign to him.

Perhaps having experienced death, he was over the fear of dying. Certainly, this was Helen Dice's interpretation of Fuzzy's inaction when bullied by the officer. She laughed when she saw it and told officer Hedge to remove himself from the premises at once or she would file a complaint. She said that the only crimes on-going here were those that the officer himself had committed.

This was brazen considering all the illegal drugs in the other room, but she went ahead and said it. She told the officer that she was not afraid of him. She was revved up for what she thought came next. She wanted Reynard Hedge to overreact and haul them both off to jail. Then he would have a case of unlawful prosecution on his hands. She would go ahead and enjoin a lawsuit with whoever it was that she needed to. She would frame herself as the sort of Pure Victim witnessed on the TV news constantly these days, those members of the roiling black underclass who had been on their way to church when some racist officers put a bullet in the back of their skulls for no reason. This type was blameless and always would be. Such was the grace victimhood conferred upon the wretched of the earth. And in a way this grace-granting was all that cops nowadays were good for, at least in Helen Dice's estimation.

She supposed such desires and Fuzzy's resurrection were interrelated.

"I don't know why God gave me a second chance with you," she said to her Herbert just after

the two cops had departed. Something else was wriggling out of his mouth. Rather than investigate up close, Helen tried to get him talking if only so that he would re-digest what it was trying to worm its way out. She thought this was an inviolable attribute of being alive: the ability to have one's mash be integrated into the body completely. As opposed to it having been in possession of a separate consciousness and having parts of it try to make you parts of *its* mash. Over time, she believed this would come. Fuzzy was in a way still an infant. His second life had just begun hours ago.

Obviously, he needed a bath. And then maybe a little bit of real food for him, which would set him right to a point. Of late, she had started to realize he would never be completely back, never a hundred percent, so to speak. The experience of death, of dying if that's what it could be called, had taken too much out of him. Maybe the familiar light in his eyes would return but flicker in a slightly more subdued way. Maybe there would be periods of lucidity and he would flicker in and out of whatever funk he was trapped in.

As ever, Helen would rationalize the changes in him. To the point that she would deem them completely natural. Because nobody stayed the same forever. Because of this she reasoned that everything was far more normal than otherwise might have been suspected. Fuzzy Dice likely had a heartbeat, for example, which ranked him as a Godly creature, alive as anybody else. Moreover, he had a soulful countenance which was readily apparent to his mother. This was when he stopped coughing up the earth's contents and looked at her for a sustained period.

"*I don't believe you've met me, the answer to your prayers*," he said to her at one point, "*I am*

Vagisil. The death of embarrassing feminine odor. Forever."

When the latest silvery maggot crawled from Fuzzy's left iris like some demonic Esther Williams rising from blackwater, Helen got scared and locked the bedroom door behind her. As the door locked from the outside, this was hardly a full proof security measure. But maybe, along with so many other things, Fuzzy would have forgotten how to work the lock if he had decided to go all Walking Dead on her at a turn. She thought at the very least the locked door would give her warning to get the hell out of there. He didn't seem so spry that he could outrun her despite her own not very well-preserved condition. Who really knew about any of this? Maybe he was a ghost and could pass through the door carefree without even realizing it. As per so many zombie movies, maybe he was blessed with super strength and would tear the entire edifice from its hinges without dallying on his way to eating his ma's flesh.

Could be. You never knew about such things until they occurred. And this, as far as any reliable source could ascertain, was a first of its kind event.

Racked by meth hunger constantly, Helen Dice didn't sleep so well these days. But now with her new house guest she was genuinely dreading closing her eyes. This made her deeply sad even as it seemed to confirm her long suspected notion that all of life was situated on a downhill slant. The more momentum you gained barreling towards the end, the more difficult it became to reverse the situation. Listening to him move around in the bedroom, she was genuinely regretful about giving officer Hedge the heave-ho. Thus, around eight PM when an off-duty officer Hung showed up by himself, she was, despite her cop hatred, grateful. She realized the officer was only here to help. He had a kind if

reserved demeanor to him. He was uncorrupted despite having Hedge as a partner. Just as oil would be uncorrupted by water.

Retying her bathrobe before answering the door, she asked officer Hung if he might like coffee.

“I’m indifferent to such gratuities,” Gerald Hung told her. He commented that in America nowadays every social occasion must be accompanied by coffee drinking. Was it that people were constantly tired and needed the caffeine injection to converse competently? Himself, Hung slept shallowly as he might, but he willed himself into wakefulness at all hours of the day. He never drank coffee as he never drank alcohol. He was merciless with himself. He had mastered the trick of denying himself pleasure constantly as an antidote to suffering. He was an ascetic of the type one found on the streets of India. Merely, he refrained from any yogic demonstrations of the mastery of the flesh. Nobody in this town knew what he was about. His own wife barely talked to him anymore. And his partner, Reynard Hedge, assumed little humanity in him for racist reasons alone.

His solitude had granted him a crystal-clear vision about the way things were. This was in opposition to the way that things were desired to be. The latter was wish fulfilment meant as a corrective for the demoralizing truth. It was just like mixing whiskey and coffee as far as Gerald was concerned. It was a decadence that Hung held a distaste for even as he had a clear understanding as to why people contorted themselves into such misperceptions to begin with.

“I believe everything you said about him,” officer Hung told Helen Dice once he had, in lieu of coffee, accepted a glass of water. “That is to say,” he told her, “I believe that you believe it. I don’t know what’s happening or why. But I know something

strange has occurred. I can look at Herbert and tell you he doesn't belong here. Maybe that bow in the neck of his I've seen before," Hung said referring to the place where Fuzzy's spinal cord snapped, "but not on anybody alive. There was a detention center I was forced to stay in once and I saw such things on the various bodies I was made to dispose of. And realize that I've seen the dead rise myself. At least in a way. I don't think things are always so clear that you can speak about them clearly within a few seconds of witnessing them," he said. "Maybe cops should take a step back and ask what is going on before they jump to conclusions."

He said one sure way to tell about the man's identity in the other room was to exhume the gravesite and see if there was a body belonging to her son still there.

"It's going to require a court order even with your consent," officer Hung said to her. "Which means you're going to have to stand there at some point and make a declaration about why you think your son's alive," he said. "Others, maybe the judge himself, will think it's a waste of time. I can't say I blame him if he denies the order. If your son had an arrest record maybe there's a DNA match that can prove who he is. Maybe that would have to be done first before the grave is exhumed," Hung said. "I don't know the procedure exactly. But you're going to have to clean yourself up and make a case for your son if he's not of sound mind for him to reclaim his identity and get what's coming to him."

The officer said that if Helen wanted, he could drive her by the cemetery in his black and white tonight. She could look for herself.

"You don't need to freak out if the dirt's upturned," Hung told her. He was recalling a similar prank that had once been pulled on G.I. and his kin while they were waiting in a facility in North

Vietnam. On that occasion the VC had marched the men out to the jungle and made them dig what they had been made to understand was their own graves. But somehow, once having them kneel on the graves' edge with eyes closed, the kill shot to the back of the neck never came. The Hmong stayed there in that position past sunset until some of them, G.I. Hung included, gathered the courage to go in search of shelter. A few men for all he knew were still out there. They simply died of fright and their spirits left them and were reclaimed by the earth. They lay in their self-dug graves and the earth was placed on top of them by nature like a mother placing a blanket over a shivering child. As if it was a benign act.

If Helen Dice wanted, she could be provided with privacy while searching. She could use Hung's policeman's flashlight to look around. Hung would stay back with his service weapon drawn to forestall either the intrusion or attack of any of the perpetrators of this prank. If that's what this was.

Nowadays, various reprobates made movies of such exploits and placed them on YouTube for perusal by the world. It was truly vile stuff. If Hung thought this was occurring, he would make an immediate arrest of whoever was filming regardless of the lack of evidence that a crime had been committed. He assumed grave desecration was a crime in Delacorte as it had been in more civilized places. He thought he wouldn't have been given such a hard time even by the likes of Reynard Hedge if, after having filmed the evidence of their crimes, these scumbags bragged about what they had done to a woman who hadn't a blood relative in the world left alive. Even for Hung it would be too much. He assumed no decent cop would object to such an interventionist practice.

G.I., so unlike Hedge (who ordinary circumstance had paired him with), wasn't at such a psychological remove from the victims of crime as to not take a keen interest about who was the crime's perpetrator and who was the crime victim.

"To me," he said to Helen, "the entire point to law and order is to separate right from wrong."

That is, crime fighting wasn't—and this was the real difference between he and officer Hedge—a simple way of putting groceries on the table. Rather, it was an all-encompassing obsession for him. Wherein God Himself would be dragged into the world He created, if only to be made to sort out the law abiders from the law breakers.

"If you ain't gonna go the extra mile and figure out who's wrong and who's right what's the point of being a cop?" Gerald Hung told Helen Dice. When saying this he for the first time revealed his Vietnamese accent. It had otherwise been subsumed within carefully wrought and terse statements. Nowadays if you asked Hung where he was from, he would tell you Mankato, Minnesota. Which was a hundred miles north of Delacorte as the crow flies. Hung thought Minnesota a kind of frozen hell that the spirit of the world had sentenced him to starting in 1985. He always believed himself spiritually rooted in the mountains of Vietnam. He thought someday when the Communist government had fallen, he would return to his village where he could die in peace. Perhaps there was one of those aforementioned unoccupied shallow graves that he could slide into and be at rest. Perhaps it would be the very grave he had been made to dig himself by the PPV.

If she didn't want to go now, the officer would go himself take a look around the cemetery for evidence of desecration.

“There are so many of these men out of work who loiter downtown,” Hung said. “And I can see some of them going up there and pulling this sort of shit just to see how it would affect you.” He said this to Helen if only to raise the issue that she might have been the victim of a con. The guy who was in the room right now might snap out of it at any moment and simply crawl out of the bedroom window. Moreover, Hung didn’t know how Helen could be so sure about another person’s identity. As human personality was so fluid that it was hard to know except for checking a driver’s license who a man was at a given moment. Maybe this chap in the next bedroom over could be tested for a degree of knowledge about the dearly departed. Even if he passed with flying colors, officer Hung would still not be completely convinced. Because a man could only testify to what he convinced himself of, not what was necessarily true. Direct experience of the universe was reserved for only a few mystics. Even for them the experience was transitory. G.I. thought it was the most obvious aspect of being alive. Wisdom dictated that one should proclaim one’s identity only in the most ironic of ways, not knowing for sure.

But Gerald was an outsider in a culture of outsiders. When he spoke, he spoke only for himself. Because he was an outsider, he could see things that others could not see. He thought of himself as a kind of priest in need of a religion to proselytize about. Somebody like Helen Dice, who truly needed Hung’s help, was a rarity. He was fortunate that he had been called onto her case. Disgusted of late by Reynard Hedge’s grossness, Hung had been calling in sick regularly. He had no intention of putting up with Reynard’s shit anymore. He was looking for a way out with him even as he kept his mouth shut about so many things.

If Helen didn't want to pursue the case, Hung thought he would pursue the case himself after hours. Or on those occasions when his partner was otherwise occupied and had no real need of him.

"You ever think to yourself," Gerald Hung said to her, "what is wrong with your boy? He don't look so hot," he told her, "even for a corpse. You ever wonder: why would he be like that if he came back from the dead? He was supposed to have God's blessing or something if he came back. Immune like Superman. You ever think how could he have God's blessing if he looks like that?"

Helen thought for the most part Fuzzy's grossness sprung from him being in need of a bath and a good night's rest.

"It's all traumatic for him I think," she said to Gerald. "I think he's confused. I think he doesn't understand why this is happening to him."

He wanted to be dead to judge by the manner of his demise. But something, either God or Nature, had dictated that this would only be a temporary situation.

"Maybe," Hung said to her after a while, "you should try to kill him again just to see if it sticks this time. You should sneak up on him and slit his throat to see if he bleeds out. If he don't bleed out, you have your answer," he said. "He's divine or something. Or maybe it would finally wake his ass up enough to tell everybody what's wrong."

Now, the killing of somebody already legally dead may not be a crime. But it was hardly that sort of action to put one back in the Lord's good graces.

"I've been holed up in this town for the last forty years waiting for a sign," Helen said to Gerald once she had come back from the bedroom door. "And now I have it. So, I'm not going to do, well, just what you want me to do. I'm not going to go back to the

way it all was before. Just because I don't like the way it is now."

Maybe it was test of faith, this visitation. She thought this was unlikely, but maybe it was. And if it was, her actions had to be considered in this light. Eventually, she supposed, Fuzzy would announce his purpose in returning. She thought she could wait until that moment came. She thought eventually everything about this matter would be made clear. And once it had she wouldn't have to think about acting. God or whatever the fuck that was pulling the strings behind the scenes would direct her. Presently, she needed to be patient. She needed to learn not to ask any undue questions. She thought maybe this was what the whole thing was about: her own arrogance in the face of life's eternal mysteries. Either that or the end of the world was soon arriving.

She had, after all, been raised a Baptist. She remembered the scary words from the Scariest Book Ever Written well enough. She was fearful to an extent that it applied to this situation. She was fearful that she was being singled out for her sins. When she was no more sinful than the next drugged up homebody down the block doing time at a bombed-out residence while devoid of a mailing address:

But someone will say, How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?
You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else...

Gerald Hung had even less faith in God than Helen Dice. He refused to believe any of it. That is, he refused to believe that we are all judged in the afterlife according to our deeds. And even less so

that any of us are given a second chance, having made such a hash of our first chance, the opportunity never could represent itself even as a test that we were bound to fail.

“Just because you don’t want something to happen,” officer Hung told her, “and pray to heaven that it won’t happen, doesn’t mean that it won’t happen and right on time. I don’t believe heaven gives much of a damn about any of us,” he said to her and picked up his fur-lined hat prefatory to beating it out the door. He thought he had articulated his case as best he could, but he still had not yet made much of an impression with her. He was at the point of giving up trying with her. Gerald was not that sort to suffer fools gladly. He didn’t have a notion of himself as a hero to the downtrodden. He certainly wouldn’t spend all his waking hours in service to a druggy stranger.

Maybe it was the shadow of the two feet being cast from under the door that had changed officer Hung’s mind for him.

“He’s been standing there the whole time listening in,” he whispered to Helen. She, by contrast, was not listening to anybody just then. She stared at the door crack for a while. There was nothing else that he could do with this case absent of a compliant complainant. He had spoken his piece to her and that was the limit of his powers. Maybe subsequent events would change Helen’s mind. Enough so that she would at least request that her new house guest be evicted. Likely by then she would be in no condition to complain about anything to anyone. Hung had heard all these stories about drug-created zombies eating people’s faces. Maybe he was seeing one for the first time. The next time he would see Helen, he believed that half her face would be missing, vanished in little bites down this sad animal’s pie hole.

Well, she would get what she deserved. If only because the Lord helped those most who helped themselves, Hung only felt slightly sorry for her at this point. Helen Dice was mule-stubborn and not too bright. Or so emotionally needy that her natural intelligence was being subordinated to the worse angels of her nature.

He had bigger fish to fry at home where his icy wife, May, was cultivating dreams of stabbing him in the neck with one of the sharpened bamboo chopsticks she and her brother manufactured in G.I's garage and marketed through eBay and Etsy. He thought of May as some sort of innate burden that the Wheel of Life had foisted upon him. Like a clubfoot or a cleft palate. From his perspective, it was a bridge too far to file for divorce. In their shared culture divorce was simply not done. Better to kill her or have her kill him than divorce. That way, the survivor could make a case for leniency based on the level of misery incurred. Whereas, divorce was merely a decadent western concept like respect for homosexuals. He and May were Americans and they gave lip service to the liberal culture that they were awash in. But their hearts belonged to the old ways exclusively.

He thought somehow the present drama could be intertwined with the one awaiting him at home to his advantage. Lord knew how, but he thought it was at least feasible. He could kill May perhaps and blame it all in some manner on the taciturn zombie spying on Hung and Helen. Cops had done worse likely to far better. Or maybe blame the stress of his job for the whole thing. By doing this he could cop a plea of aggravated manslaughter. Seven years at the most factoring in good behavior in this under-served state and then he would be free. Completely. His lawyer could bring the zombie Dice up on the stand as a character witness. He would point to this

freak and have him regurgitate a giant bug as an explanation for why officer Hung had snapped.

You deal with this movie monster shit day in day out, no wonder bad things happened to you and those in your immediate vicinity.

“If I were the emperor of the earth,” thought Hung (though not in so many words), “I would dig a burial pit large enough to contain the flower of a great nation.”

Once having engaged his cruiser, Hung let the thought fade to nothingness. He realized bad actions are from bad thoughts sprung. He wanted to set an example for his community and the army of potential reckless drivers he knew existed in this part of the world. He kept his hands at 10 and 2 the entire trip, for example, as per the outdated Iowa driver’s education manual. His cellphone he kept between his knees and had no intention of answering its summons while the car was engaged. If only to not be accused by a citizen of hypocrisy while at a traffic stop, he assumed a perfect stance while operating his vehicle. His speed was always below the posted speed. He had memorized what it was on every stretch of this town, so he didn’t have to look.

Gerald Hung was a good cop when not contemplating uxoricidal acts. He would take violent exception at any person who said differently.

“What you doing out here just now, dear?” officer Hung said to the ill-defined shadow belonging to the Reverend Nan Kramer when seeing her on his second pass around the local graveyard. Just like Nan, Hung had been here trying to gin up the courage to look at Fuzzy Dice’s gravesite. Somehow his presence had communicated a type of sobriety that argued against the theory each of them once held that this was all an elaborate fraud. If only for himself, and to avoid the gnawing doubt that seeing

the man from close had caused in him, Hung intended to find the grave in the small cemetery then train his flashlight on the ground to make sure that no clod of dirt had been upturned and no coffin ejaculated from the hole it had once been placed in. Eventually Hung would be able to face his wife and her killer chopsticks with a far steadier demeanor than before. He would believe that what he had beheld here was mere evidence of felonious behavior devoid of eschatological motive. He would rest easy as the dead knowing that this was so. He realized that God had no role to play in the nature of things. He wanted complex explanations for passingly simple matters. He thought the dead rising would prove nothing beyond the inability of the universe to adhere to its own dark laws. He would insist that it had nothing to do with the end of the world, merely its continuation in a deeply moronic way.

He was out to establish mankind as the author of its own fate, and thus be able to claim that those who saw Fuzzy Dice as evidence of something holy were too stupid to hold such an opinion on any important matter.

“It’s illegal to be in this place after dark,” officer Hung said to Nan not knowing if it was. He shined his big cop flashlight in her face. What he saw was that she had been crying. Also digging in the muck, to judge by the layer of topsoil on her pants and work shirt.

All the rain of late in this part of the world had made the ground ripe for porting with bare hands alone. And so, he wondered if there might be a connection to the deluge and the dead rising? If not in a symbolic sense than a physical one. They had always been down there, waiting to escape. The high-water table had given them their chance. And now it was too late to do anything about it.

“You shouldda seen what I just seen,” Nan said to G.I., who was doing his best to be uncomprehending. “I been here for the last few hours trying to figure out what’s goin’ on and getting soaked,” she said. “I been calling the police night and day but still I don’t get an answer!”

She said that Hung should put his pistol down and enter this sacred ground on his hands and knees begging Christ Jesus for forgiveness.

“You don’t know what you’re dealing with by not dealing with it,” she said to him. “You think you’re so smart with all the answers. But believe me if you want answers you wouldn’t come inside here.”

Officer Hung spat into the large black puddle between them and put the cruiser in gear. Dyke/town drunk, he thought not bothering to attach a name to a semi-familiar face. If he wanted to go somewhere, he would damn well allow himself to go somewhere independent of the cross. His own Buddhist roots argued against the ultimate interpretation of anything. But just like Helen Dice, he was utterly captivated by Nan’s sincerity. He thought only a true believer would talk this way to a cop who supposedly had her dead to rights in the commission of a crime.

Twenty feet beyond them both just off the old cobblestone fence that in more fruitful times had enveloped a school not a graveyard, three corpses [*ed.* whose identities for brevity's sake have been elided from this narrative] were in the process of extricating themselves from the soft ground. Wriggling like worms yet super strong, their fingers were full of the hardwood coffins they had smashed through to get here. Don’t ask them why they rose, any more than ask yourself why you were born. Perhaps, as Hung would attest later, it was all the business end of a celestial accident, a glitch in the universe’s executable code.

Couldda meant something relevant to us all. Only time would tell. People needed to be able to separate the wheat from the chafe, so to speak. They, not God or corporations, needed to ascertain what was relevant and meaningful if only for themselves. They would be the final word on what it all meant. They needed to make a claim as the authors of their personal Apocalypse if only to preserve self-dignity.

It would matter ultimately only if they said it did.

Chapter Two: Our Town

I.

Driving into the small city of Cedar Lake, Iowa from the regional airport just beyond the city limits, a hard-to-place scent was encountered by FBI Deputy Director John Martling.

“Smells like Willie Wonka fell on hard times and had to cannibalize an Oompa-Loompa,” he told the clerk at the Four Seasons Hotel concerning the smell. “As if they burnt that orange-skinned unfortunate out in the open as an accusation to the world,” he said. “*See what you made us do* was their intended message here. They roasted these poor creatures without names on a spit and let the wind provide their eulogy,” he said. “No, they didn’t shed tears over their actions,” he said. “They were righteously pissed. They viewed themselves as the real victims. The Willie Wonka gang. They wanted to demonstrate to the world the fruit that their misery yielded. They wanted to have the death of an innocent be on other men’s heads.”

According to Deputy Director Martling, the smell was syrupy but suggestive of something rotten just below it. He couldn’t imagine folks could live in this place for such a long time that they would not know what he was talking about. To him, the aroma was nigh on overpowering. He thought this kid behind the desk was pulling his leg asking him about it. He

thought maybe he was on the Chamber of Commerce payroll trying to dupe the rare tourist who would happen into these parts. The kid would gaslight them into believing that they were experiencing an olfactory hallucination.

Everyday likely somebody would trundle onto the Four Seasons' linoleum paneled lobby and ask the clerk about the local smell. He would feign ignorance for the twenty or thirty seconds it took for the subject to change. He tried to make believe that he didn't know what all these people were talking about. He clearly had lost the sense of smell himself.

Under scrutiny from Martling, the clerk would soon admit that what he was smelling was the local cereal factory on the town's outskirts burning another batch of Honey Nut what-have-yous due to its accrued product backlog.

"They don't sell, they go up in smoke," the desk clerk, who had actually worked at the giant factory before the most recent bunch of layoffs, told Martling after a tipping point was reached. "They got an incinerator that holds three thousand gallons at a time," he told him. "It's not a good day when it happens," he said. "Because it lets people know the company's hurting," he said. "It lets people know that things aren't like they were in the old days. Back then that sort of smell probably would have meant the place was on fire."

In the old days said the clerk (who had learned about this all second hand from his dad), the company would hold an enormous picnic each Fourth of July for its employees. They would put up placards of all their business partners who had chipped in to make it happen.

"Back then, they treated agri-business in general with more respect than they do now," he told Martling. Many of the places the factory sold to

were individually-owned supermarkets who could be cut off from the cereal business at any time.

Now, he said, there's four big conglomerates in the whole country. They don't sign a contract with their suppliers and the price point keeps getting re-negotiated every six months. They tell the cereal companies if they don't like it, they could go sell to somebody else.

According to the Big Four, there's no product loyalty in the public anymore. According to them, they could sell their customers anything they wanted, and they would just eat it up. Consumers didn't know their heads from their hole in the ground, according to the big markets. All was manipulation and customer-shafting. Consumers didn't focus on brand names any longer when considering their breakfast cereal.

The environmental concerns over burning so much organic material were apparently negligible when held in consideration to the cereal company's survival.

"Nobody here notices that much to be honest," the clerk, Michael Kay, told Deputy Director Martling when the room keys were handed over. When asked for smoking or non-smoking, the Deputy Director commented that he didn't know there was a choice any longer. He thought it was a good sign in some small way that folks were still allowed to smoke cigarettes in the privacy of their own rooms. He thought accommodations for smokers should be made. Not just for smokers but for all kinds of vices altogether. There should be a heroin room for heroin users. There was too much censoriousness in the culture presently. He didn't think it did anybody any good at all.

If Martling had to live out here all the year round, he supposed the occasional aroma emanate

from the south part of town would be the least of the problems he had to deal with.

“The last flood we had,” Mike said to Martling when asked about potential walking routes, “closed Riverside Park for good. After a time, they thought there was no point to rebuilding. As it was just going to wash away in another ten years. Something like that,” he said.

“They ordered an environmental impact study that would take seven years to complete. The federal government is pressuring the city to build a levy. The city doesn’t want to obscure the view from planned developments downtown. So, they’re going to punt on the whole thing and pass the decision-making burden to the next administration.”

The river that flowed through the city center was unpredictable. Over the past twenty years, its banks hadn’t proven themselves amenable to modern living. Like so many other Iowa rivers, it was deep and random in its meanderings. But the local chamber of commerce treated it like a country brook that could function as a magnet for development. Lot of sunset walks along fictive parkland in their brochures. And no structure visible at all in these visions to hold the water back should the river crest its banks.

“If I were you,” Martling said fumbling with his bags as a line formed behind him, “I’d get the hell out of here while the getting is good. No offense to you or yours, but living in Iowa is like living on the lip of an active volcano. At least now it is. If it’s not the floods that get ya, it’s the tornados. And if it’s not the tornadoes, it’s all the other stuff you hear about going on just north of here.”

Having seen the flash of Martling’s FBI badge while whipping out his credit card to pay for incidentals, Mike Kay asked him if that was the reason for his Iowa sojourn. He wondered if Martling

was here to investigate what he insisted on calling the Delacorte Miracles.

Deputy Director Martling, who had no religious feeling in him, did not know precisely to what Mike was referring.

"*The Delacorte Miracles*," he said to Kay. "That's what they're calling it around here, are they? Maybe *Miracle at Delacorte*. Rename it for whatever *Hallmark Hall of Fame* special they'll have in the works for when it's all over. In an effective title, see, you need to put the most important word first: *miracle*. I've been told this on several occasions. Nobody gives a shit what town it happened in, I'm guessing," he said. "Probably the media wishes it happened in midtown Manhattan, if only for their own comfort. Because I understand there's a fear about the local river overflowing its banks again. They don't want to be caught up in that misery, at least if they can help it. They don't want to have it spelled out for them: the connection between one on-going disaster and the next."

When the floods of Iowa came, (as they had nowadays every three years, more or less), they washed away not only the equity of the homeowners unlucky enough to reside in the flood zone, but so much topsoil as well. Infiltrated with pesticides and herbicides, it had washed into the local water supply. This had happened with such frequency that there was a growing speculation amongst those PhD's that John Martling had consulted before catching his flight out here that all these resuscitations had something to do with the spillage. If so, this was hardly a miracle but another chapter in the ongoing tragedy in the decline of the American Midwest. It all could be explained in a rational way. Which was to say, without recourse to *miracles*. Indeed, the toxic spillage angle had become Martling's secondary hypothesis about the

events, far behind *Local Hayseeds Perpetrate Fraud*. Once arriving in Delacorte, his intention was to humor various officials just before kicking them to the curb. He was upset that he had been summoned here to begin with. Goddamnit, call an exorcist if you think you have a case of demonic possession on your hands! But voters needed to be humored by their elected officials. An illusion of progress needed to be maintained at all costs by the class of sociopaths who ran the country. Martling had strict orders not to offend the public. But, then again, they had assigned the case to him, who possessed a reputation for brusqueness and alcohol-abetted truth telling. In his eyes, this was a mixed message. Prevailing Authority probably wanted John to be himself but also establish a firewall between the Feds and his famous bluntness. Once back at Quantico, he would be lightly disciplined for calling the governor of Iowa (who had established a resurrection hotline a week ago) a town drunk in search of a lamppost to lean on. His scorn would be their scorn, even though they would be at pains to deny it.

Likely they sensed this was a shit assignment that needed to be given to one of their most expendable directors as a punishment for Future Crime.

“Do I look to you like a man with a bunch of rosary beads in my motherfucking pocket?” John Martling had said to Mike Kay just before splitting for his room. Indeed, Martling had already dismissed the notion of religious intervention out of hand. Jesus Christ with the light blonde hair could ride down from heaven in front of him on a white stallion on a rainbow bridge and John would still be disinclined to adopt a spiritual outlook. He just didn’t believe in that shit. He would never be terrorized into doing so. In a sense, it was his

professional obligation to be skeptical about religion. He was an investigator of deeply worldly matters, after all, of men who split their wives' heads in twain with an ax and tried to cover up the evidence with a staple gun and a raft of excuses for the when and where. He had seen enough of human behavior to realize his fellow men as the offspring of apes, not the ancestors of angels. If there were angels in the world, they surely must look at human affairs with the same sort of detached disgust as Deputy Director Martling. In other words, when people died, they lay in the ground and worms ate them. *Period*. If this was *not* the case, then there likely was some other case similarly stripped of supernatural causation to be reckoned as true. Were we all a simulation in an extraterrestrial video game? Well, it was either one thing or the other. He thought the common reality was the obvious reality. He thought all metaphysics intellectual bunk. He was a cop, not a philosopher. That we resided in a universe of inalterable facts was incontestable to him. That was the bedrock on which the law was built, after all. Facts were all that counted to an honest cop. And facts were, to put it pathetically, cold and dead.

If people wanted to believe in the Lord's presence in this world, they needed to argue the point far beyond the religious dogma and Biblical citations they were given to substituting in lieu of real factual evidence.

"They'll say to me: *how can you prove it's not so*?" Martling told his liaison from the Des Moines office on this case, a Ghanaian-American named Samuel Makamba, once reconnoitering with him in his room on the hotel's fourth and ultimate floor. "And I'll tell them simply: that's not the way it works. They, these godly types, are so used to having their own prejudices flamed, they don't

realize they're obliged to argue for something. I'll ask them about what they think is going on and ask for their reasons behind it. Then I'll hit 'em with the scripture I read on the plane over about the dead rising and so forth. In the Book of Revelations, for example, this great event is supposed to transpire just before the Final Judgment. But where is it now, this big judging contest? Did it already happen and none of us had been made aware? If the dead have arisen, why no Judgment? And if part of the Bible is wrong, the chronology off, why couldn't the whole thing be wrong? In asking them these questions, I'll engage the part of their brains that they're not used to using. Which is the part that actually *thinks*. We'll go at it like that for a while. And then, Trump-like, I'll declare myself the victor and that'll be that. Because I think this sort of religious type can only thrive in a climate of absolute certainty where everybody agrees with you. They don't have any reasons, not so much, for believing what they believe. They're dopes to the core. And once that's been exposed, I'm assuming the argument is over."

John thought a type of defense should have already been built against the sort of religious mania that would surely be found to plague Delacorte, Iowa once he finally arrived. He thought some of the religiously inclined had the potential to impede an official investigation if they had gathered in sufficient numbers. He felt the need, thus, to spread the Bad News around as a defense against mob rule. He had a plan initially approved by his boss to leak the news about imminent arrest of the four "Returnees" as they were sometimes called on the grounds of graveyard desecration. Of course, no conviction would ever come from this charge. But John had wanted to shut down the rolling thunder of religious zealotry that such scenes would surely gather around them if no secular answer was quick

in forthcoming. He wanted to unmask these men as perpetrators of a hoax (even though he was not entirely sure that this was the case). Could have been all the agrichemicals' spill-off turned the dead zombie, if one was absent of a definitive scientific argument saying that it was not so. In this case, the Returnees would be considered innocent. They would be seen as in need of extended medical treatment and sympathized with. Brains would need to be scanned to check for evidence of mutated parasites near the medulla, for example. But this could only happen when the government acknowledged that the events in question had actually taken place.

So it was that government needed to disprove the Apocalypse, if only to secure their monopoly on power. The FBI, not God, was in charge in Iowa. If there was another layer of authority beyond the federal power structure that ordinary Americans were forced to tithe unto, a reassessment of the *entire* power structure of the country might occur spontaneously. Again, such conceits were unstated by Martling's superiors. But he realized which way the earth underneath his feet sloped at any given moment without having to be alerted to it. He thought himself, at least in this instance, an effective administrator. An avalanche of contrary evidence would need to be in place to move him from this self-conception. There was too much to lose absent a religious conversion that, let's face it, was not in the offing for him. John Martling was religious as stone. He just found the whole concept of the supernatural as absurd and contrary to his best interests and the interests of the FBI.

Just before unpacking, he asked agent Makamba for his assessment.

"You're asking me what I think is the cause of it all?" Makamba said to Martling.

“No. I don’t give a damn about the cause. At least not at this point. I’m asking you what you think the sway of public opinion is locally. That is, how many nuts are out there right now and what sort of counter-intelligence efforts may be required by the FBI.”

Samuel Makamba didn’t know at least at a precise level what Martling was on about. He told him this not in so many words.

“We have a phenomenon here,” he said to John, “that requires an explanation. And we have people who need our help.”

The semi-automatic pistol that was loose in its holster on Deputy Director Martling’s right side at some point would need to be loaded. He hadn’t known that this would be the case until now.

Until now, he was up in the air as to whether this was a real case. As if it was all a satire of an actual case loosely discussed as a religious event.

John Martling asked agent Makamba how long he had been with the Bureau.

“Why would you want to know such a thing?” agent Makamba told him after revealing it was less than two years. Here his point was that the seniority of a given agent was not an accurate index of his or her competency. But obviously based on scant evidence Martling had already flagged Sam as an incompetent. This was always the case when anybody in any profession asked a colleague how long they had been on the job. It was a polite way of starting a fight. It was a way of pointing out the deficiencies of someone and attributing to them the residue of inexperience as a reason why.

If agent Makamba didn’t realize he was being called out, John Martling had already decided that, past this initial briefing, Makamba shouldn’t be engaged anymore.

“Do you understand at least,” Martling finally said to him, “why both I and the Agency might have a problem with that sort of interpretation of our duties?”

Afterall, neither he nor Makamba were members of the clergy, nor biologists with a specialty in the mechanics of death.

“We’ll drive to Delacorte and they’ll tell us a tale,” he said to Samuel. “But what do you think we should do with the intel later? We interview the so-called Returnees and they speak of a tunnel of light that they feel compelled to walk through, for example. Do we have a sketch artist sketch a likeness of said tunnel? Do we search out the location on Google Maps? Do we classify St. Peter or whatever dead relative they believe they have talked to on the other side as a POI? Do we subpoena them? Because, if there’s a criminal case here, there’s nothing much to think about. Because generally the FBI isn’t called in on pranks. But if there is no criminal case, we as a society are all fucked beyond recognition any way. Likely. Thus, it’s a public relations detail that we’re on, agent, absolutely. This detail has nothing to do with genuine police work. The last thing these folks need up there is to have the feds start walking around like they have something important to contribute to the situation’s resolution. It’s not a mystery we’re dealing with here so much as an extended bit of crowd control. The government in Washington remains convinced that the people of the Midwest need reassurances. And you need to consider the possibility that at least in this matter the more you investigate, the less reassurance there will be to offer these poor unfortunates. You shouldn’t go rushing into matters especially where no good can be done. I thought it was an obvious point, agent, but I guess it is not. I don’t believe it’s prudent

actually for us to discuss this further. As misunderstandings will be bound to occur as a result. I think your job is to take your cue from me. And my tendency in this matter will be to disappear from view. We try not to laugh at farm folk as it's impolite to do so. But beyond this single rule I have no real advice to give you."

On the room's TV that eventually Martling would go ahead and disconnect completely, CNN was documenting what the chyron had referred to as *The Iowa Events*. Well, from the Establishment's point of view this was preferable to *The Miracles at Delacorte*. There was nothing that shook the foundation of the West more than religious visions. It was hard to see why religion in this country was ever allowed to propagate unchecked by government power. The present-day power structure was sentimental for the Bill of Rights, absent of another document to take its place. They needed a great excuse to roll back the Establishment Clause. And perhaps here was one staring them in the face. At the sight of the dead rising, they would allow a general panic to erupt and then at the eleventh hour begin to crack heads. Allow religion but surveil houses of worship. And throw the more politically inclined preachers in the pokey for good. If you kept a firm, even pressure on something, eventually it is suppressed. Jim Comey, John's boss, knew this well. Perhaps nobody had looked this far ahead in the matter yet. In his initial report, Director Martling would of course raise the idea if only to discount it immediately, realizing that currently all suggestions were public suggestions, and every remark was permanent.

To Samuel Makamba, such talk was redolent of cynicism mixed with dereliction of duty. He explained this to John Martling in a rapid-fire way.

“I think so many of your conceits are unexamined conceits,” Martling told Samuel and then threatened to fire him. No preamble or series of warnings with this. As he felt this was the best way of dealing with an insubordinate agent. He had seen agents of Samuel Makamba’s temperament and he had decided it would be best if he left sooner rather than later. With that sort, the moral zeal would always degrade to common tyranny before long. Sam would always be in search of new ways to help people and end up as their jailer ultimately. He would be utterly awestruck at the ingratitude on display. He didn’t know the necessary limits a person must place on his or her altruism if they were still to remain compassionate souls.

At this stage in his life John Martling was slightly sickened by such raw naivete.

“You need to route this up the chain of command if you feel so strongly about it,” was the last thing he said to agent Makamba, setting him up for a charge of insubordination if he was actually dumb enough to do it. He had suspected that Makamba and other local agents would be so gung-ho about the investigation because they were so fearful about the alternative. They wanted this all to be a hoax, so they were prepared to bend over backwards to make it so. But just because the Good Lord Herself had at one instant appeared before you didn’t mean that you had to believe in Her. Belief, in both religious and personal affairs, was a choice, not a compulsion. Atheists had their own dogma too. Just like Christians they were required to embrace dogma throughout their Dark Night of the Soul. He thought Sam Makamba needed to be a little more forthright as regarded his lack of confidence in the godhead. Well, maybe he didn't know him so well and was reading him wrong. But in Martling’s view, the Miracles at Delacorte were hardly reason for

panic. Perhaps, as per G.G. Marquez, we were all merely the figments of a dream of a blue dog. And now the blue dog was on its back preparing to wake. That was all…merely. The world was a silly place, god-ordained or not. There was no reason to admit awe in any affect it demonstrated.

To John Martling, this was obvious. So much so that when somebody refused to acknowledge it, he began to pull rank with them in a strictly spiritual way.

“I’ve been battling demons long enough to have earned my contempt over the likes of you,” he said to agent Makamba who had lately thought it might be prudent to simply exit the scene for good. Somebody in Des Moines had mentioned the personality quirks of this Deputy Director. With Sam, it had gone in one ear and out the other. He thought he would cross that bridge when he came to it. As nothing could be done about it. He thought he could bear up to a difficult boss. He had not counted on the boss being certifiable. He had seen Martling’s face go red by slow but easily measurable degrees. Now here John Martling was on the verge of blowing his stack. As if he had been at the end of the case and was near exhaustion. When he had only just arrived an hour before.

Martling was in fact a high-functioning alcoholic who having been hours separated from his beloved hootch (the flight from DC was a dry one of all things!) was looking to take it out on somebody prefatory to getting loaded.

“It’s nothing to be terrified over, the nothingness of death,” he told Sam and thought briefly about the career repercussions about kicking in the TV in front of him as opposed to merely detaching the co-ax. Well, it wouldn’t be the first time he would be in Dutch with the suits. But, then again, the thin ice underneath a man’s feet seldom

broadcasted a signal that it was about to break. He thought he had only a certain number of chances with the power structure in Washington and that number was unknown by him. Such a rash act could have been career suicide. Or it could have been no big deal. But Makamba, if asked to testify, would invariably do him dirty. In retrospect he should have been a little more collegial with this young man. But his emotions were like intemperate attack dogs straining at their rotted tethers. He couldn't really, at this point in his decline, control himself. He needed help both psychiatric and hepatological. His liver was in the initial phases of cirrhosis. And once the condition began to present itself, he would admit fear and grief of being on the grim reaper's short list. *I shouldda done something about this long ago*, he would say. Or words to that effect in the meeting with his hepatologist when options for a liver transplant were being discussed.

On the way to the hotel, he trolled unsuccessfully for an open liquor store in this god-forsaken town. For lunch he would order a double scotch and a beer from room service. This would tide him over until the night when he would start drinking in earnest. No, he didn't enjoy getting bombed so much anymore, but he couldn't really stop if he wanted. In his more reflective moments, he realized that long ago he had stepped into a trap. Well, maybe this assignment would be the end of him, and he would die in an honorable away as opposed to in some lonely hospice expiring on the transplant list.

What he meant to tell Makamba was that death could be a relief and life a burden. Death was the God-ordained miracle prayed for by sufferers of all stripes. Resurrection was a mere malfunctioning of that miracle's mechanics, a cause for ridicule rather than reverence. But people were so terrified about

that which they didn't understand completely. He always thought there was some judgment hidden in mysterious acts aimed at them directly. For some reason.

John told agent Makamba that he would meet him in Delacorte tomorrow morning after the press conference that he was scheduled to preside over with the chief of police on the steps of the tiny Delacorte courthouse.

"The best thing you could do between then and now," he said to him, "is recall what I want from you. Then decide if you're willing to provide it. If you're not willing to provide it, agent, I would tell you to call in sick tomorrow and try your best to get a transfer. As you're probably going to be fired otherwise, I would use whatever leverage I could. You should say that you're uncomfortable around me, for example, and imply there's a racial component to it. Usually that would be enough to move whatever HR hard ass there is you have to deal with off their original position. They're all scared shitless after a EEO complaint in the government. And if they were to interview me, I'd try my best to corroborate your story, albeit in a way that doesn't implicate me."

Martling supposed that Makamba might take his advice. But more likely he would defy him. He thought this agent a familiar type around the Bureau. Sam was somebody cursed with the Midas touch in reverse. He would burn out his partners in no time and alienate his bosses enough so that he would be eased out in a gradual way.

John thought at some level Sam was aware of his tendency to alienate but couldn't help himself. He saw himself as of a finer cut altogether than ordinary drudges and was at pains to articulate this truth to all those in shouting distance of him. He had drifted toward police work believing it had a morally

absolutist slant. He was shocked when it had been revealed that this was not the case. In fact, being a cop at any level required a man to indulge in moral relativism. Makamba originally assumed this applied only to politicians. There didn't seem to be any escape from moral compromise. It had nothing to do with personal rectitude. He realized belatedly that all moral judgment was situational. He realized belatedly that the only way to escape moral compromise was to quit and become a priest. He thought everyday about the mistake he had made after college. He thought there was no way to right the wrong.

After this meeting, Makamba would return to his room in a much cheaper hotel and contemplate the error of his ways with John Martling.

"Not a second of anything different," he would say to himself, confirming Martling's initial impressions of him. Then he would turn on the TV. There, running constantly on a cable news loop, was a badly shaky video somebody had filmed on their phone peering inside the Angels of Mercy cemetery. Was that a hand sticking out of a bit of upturned ground or a bit of paper waving in a breeze near a nondescript grave? Agent Makamba thought he knew the answer, but he wasn't about to impose his viewpoint on the universe. He thought any sort of FBI-assisted video enhancement technique would be useless in distinguishing an inanimate object from an animate object. He thought whoever it was might as well stop showing the video on constant play back at once.

II.

On the highway up to Delacorte, various birds exotic to John Martling's eye were spotted in repose on the depressed medium.

“It gives you a sense of how it used to be,” the Deputy Director told Mike Kay who John had contracted into driving. John didn’t like driving generally as it invited a DWI. Especially in a new place where he could not navigate by ordinary memory alone, he didn’t care for the practice. He wasn’t picky really about the cars he was driven in, but he liked a wide back seat if only so that he could go fetal and nap. Presently the scenery was proving too engaging for that. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing from an ornithological perspective. He had always assumed Iowa, indeed so much of the Midwest, as a semi-desolate region somehow too soil poor to sport a lively eco-system.

Pheasants from Alberta lounged in one of the presently receding lakes on the highway median. Passively they watched the parade of vehicles.

“They look like they don’t have a care in the world,” Martling told Michael.

Lord only knew if this was true. These birds were creatures with a supremely impassive demeanor. Did they have thoughts and, therefore, cares? First impression was that they survived on instinct alone. They had thoughts regarding food and navigation merely. Thus, they were not to be admired much less envied. You couldn’t look at such a creature and project any sort of psychological depth onto them. They seemed blissful because merely they were dead to the world. They were lampposts with feathers. They were somebody’s dinner waiting to be claimed.

Other birds nearby were gaining an impressive array of sustenance due to the oversaturated landscape of the nearby median. These were seen by the agent as entirely surprising and unsurpassably exotic given the dull grayness of the Iowa fields post-harvest.

“Red-tailed crows those, which is a scavenger bird,” Kay told John Martling when he had focused in on a particular murder near a ripped-out metal fence. “Back home,” Mike said, “back in Ankeny we used to shoot them as a practice for the real hunt in fall,” he said. “They didn't add up to much trophy wise,” he told John, “and you sure couldn’t eat ‘em even on a dare,” he said. “They’re carrion hunters for the most part, vermin. Hard to say why they’re out here in such numbers,” Mike said. “There’s worms for them mostly and other dead birds. Occasionally a coyote pup dead of starvation. Or even a deer that got clipped by a car and made it all the way to the road middle before it died. Other than that, there’s no reason at all for them to be here.”

If Mike wanted, John said, they could venture into the median and kill a few of these creatures just for old times’ sake on the way back to the hotel.

“Look,” he said to Kay, “It’s surpassingly strange times we’re living through. There’s no reason, therefore, to adhere to rules regarding the limit on personal conduct. There’s chaos in the world and we’ve all been liberated by it. No need to mourn over the way it all once was. Merely the courageous thing to do is to embrace the new reality in a two-fisted way. We’re fucked most likely, all of us. But I think we all, even the most optimistic among us, knew that already. I think we in the shadow of our own demise must give ourselves permission to do as we please, to suck the marrow out of life, so to speak. It might be what we are facing here is an extinction-level event. We need to live more in the moment. Which might mean doing whatever the fuck we want. After the crows are gone, we can stand there in a puddle maybe and train our fire at passing semis. Might be a laugh, son, and if they give us lip about it, I’ll flash my

badge at ‘em and then describe my station. I’ll tell ‘em I’m leading the investigation intended to protect humanity from the zombie hordes. They’ve all heard about it. They’re all worried about it even if they don’t want to admit this is so. I’ll look one of these goddamned truckers in the eye then accuse them of practicing black magic. I’ll say where were you on the night of so and so when the first gravesite was disturbed. Yes, it’s all a bit of high comedy with me intended not to reveal but disguise. I’ll say this to them using as few words as possible so that they can understand it clearly. I’ll draw a pentacle in the dust on the outside of their mud flaps and accuse them of crimes against nature. I’ll explain it to them in a way they understand. I’ll say they’re going to prison merely based on the accusation. I have unlimited power in this regard. People panic and they look for strong leaders to protect them. I look at this and I think how well this all might end for me. I’m speaking from the heart here, believe me. I’m simply telling you what I’ll do and asking you to do it too. Play along as you might.”

Perhaps by the time the shit hit the fan in earnest, John would have revealed himself to be as helpless as anybody else. He would disremember his bluster. Once he had, being called to account for false promises rendered would be the least of his worries. Through the fog of drink-induced nausea, he had already calculated that this was so and given himself permission to carry on. Maybe there would be an interregnum period between the rule of law and godly judgment where his authority would hold sway. He hadn’t really made a prediction about the immediate future as he had been too busy getting shit faced. But he meant every word he said to Mike Kay. He thought bird hunting was a fine activity. He was somewhat downcast that he hadn’t found time

to do it himself back in Washington. He wanted to harvest the fruits of his labor for his dinner on a given night.

A man really felt at home in nature. The problem was that this strip of land they were driving through was tagged as an economic redevelopment zone wherein prospective businesses could build a factory and be assessed minimal taxes for the first ten years of existence.

"They thought about a lithium-ion battery plant run by a car manufacturer in California," Kay said to John Martling when he became rhapsodic once more about this stretch of undeveloped earth that he had mistaken for a bird sanctuary. "They were going to build a whole little town around it," he said. "It would be just for the workers and their families. But something happened in the meantime and the whole process was cancelled. So, they keep on talking the development corridor up while the birds move in. Probably you're right and they'll turn the whole stretch into a park or something. Just because they want to be rid of the area on their books."

Here was one economic sob story amongst tens of thousands in the area. Director Martling had become inured to all of them.

"If these folks want work," he said to Mike, "they should move out to where the work is. They need to take some initiative like their ancestors. Nobody here is native to the area including the so-called "native" Americans. They should get their head out of their ass collectively and do something positive for a change. In my opinion."

As he spoke, Martling was facing the back-seat cushions. The words came out fairly muffled therefore as if muttered before going to sleep.

"You just say things without thinking them through," Mike Kay told him and maneuvered to an exit ramp. "I'm not saying such impulsiveness is a

bad thing. Just the way it is with you. But out here if you keep it up, somebody's going to call you on it. Eventually people are going to look at you and ask you what you are talking about. And then in some way you will be obliged to answer."

Martling thought this might be so. But he couldn't help himself regardless. His diarrhea of the mouth was chronic. He had stopped self-censoring long ago.

"Son," he said to Mike when they were pulling into the Delacorte courthouse, "I'm glad I have you around to show me right from wrong. No, I think I'm going to need it before this case is finished. I think I'm going to need every bit of advice that an Iowa rube has to offer."

The Delacorte chief of police that Martling was set to liaison with was a no show to the news conference. Which left only officers Hedge and Hung for him to debrief prior to its start. The local cops were there with the sullen FBI agent Samuel Makamba in one corner staring daggers at the lot of them.

"In as few words as you can," John Martling said to officer Hedge who seemed the more gregarious of the pair, "describe for me any change in the case in the last twenty-four hours."

The four "Returnees" had all been housed in a dedicated wing of the local hospital. None of them had any sort of tale to tell.

Their testimony was irrelevant to the spiel John was preparing for the media. He wouldn't have told reporters what a given Returnee told them in confidence under pain of death. He didn't care about their testimony anyway. They weren't preparing a criminal case against the universe anytime soon.

"Timetables and narratives," he said to the officers who seemed to have no clue at all what

Martling wanted from them. “I’m asking you to give me something to work with,” he said. “I’m trying to navigate around the facts as opposed to plowing right through them,” he said. “I want to give the dogs gristle, not meat,” he said. “I have no intention of telling the media where the case actually stands at this point.”

One of the Returnees, the only woman of the group, had over the past day and half taken to screaming out the names of the 1972 Phoenix Suns starting lineup in an order (it had just been ascertained through diligent police work) from shortest to tallest.

“Dick Van Arsdale to Connie ‘the Hawk’ Hawkins,” Reynard Hedge said to the Deputy Director going over his notes. “Well, it’s been confirmed several times,” he said. “But beyond that I can’t tell you the connection at all.”

Forty minutes later John Martling emerged onto the courthouse steps to provide an FBI briefing entirely ignorant of the case’s latest developments.

If you wanted to give your best in such a situation, the trick was to treat important matters related to the case as minutiae not worth speaking about rightly. Correspondingly, you would treat the minutiae as important material worth reiterating constantly, if only to throw the various would-be journalists off the track for good.

“Four gold fillings in each of the recovered people’s mouths and we don’t know what exactly the number signifies,” Martling said to the group of a hundred and fifty so journos doing their best to keep their balance on the narrow courthouse steps. A better way to conduct these unfortunately necessary sessions might be to hold them inside a gymnasium where these hacks could be plied with donuts and hot coffee. The most lamentable aspect of Marling’s job was its component of media

relations. If only because interfacing with the media for any amount of time did not bring the case any closer to closure. Indeed, these people seemed to delight in hindering the investigation by leaking information to the public. The trick with them was to feed them garbage to the point that their appetite was partially satisfied. They needed to be tended to, however dismissively. They were domesticated animals that needed to be exercised daily simply to maintain a degree of compliance within them.

The gold fillings angle was an excellent detail that Sam Makamba had unearthed on his report the other day.

“We don’t know what it means yet,” the Deputy Director said to them in an elongated way that was meant to suggest a desperate longing to know the truth but was interpreted by some in the crowd as a papered over yawn. “Wisdom teeth and anterior molar, canine and bicuspid,” Martling said, reciting the locations where the fillings were located when prompted. Maybe a meaningful pattern was to be found in their location. Or maybe it was a random occurrence that told a tale merely about the universe's random nature.

It was a classic red herring, spread across a scent trail to obfuscate and confuse. Hounds didn’t have the mental acuity to know when they were being intentionally led astray, but ostensibly intelligent reporters with bachelor’s degrees from sometimes elite colleges occasionally possessed that ability. It had taken John Martling a long time to figure out that the media were a gaggle of hacks and didn’t mind being given crap as long as they were given something. They were for the most part mailing it in as far as their reportorial output was concerned. They merely wanted to be respected, if only on a superficial level. They wanted an official like Martling to give lip service to being in a fear and

trembling over their collective power. Martling would stutter from time to time as if deeply nervous about standing in front of them. He would be sure to make eye contact with each one of them when he dissembled, as if he were an interviewee attempting to impress a tough-minded employer.

Reviewing dental records seemed to smack of a type of forensic thoroughness which in this instance was entirely missing from the investigation otherwise.

“Any theories yet?” one of the reporters, a young woman struggling to keep her balance on the top step, asked Martling as the Q-and-A session was underway.

Martling counted to ten before answering.

“We have theories,” he said to her, “But that doesn’t mean we’re not open minded about any sort of evidence that comes our way. It doesn’t mean that we’ve ruled anything out just because we’re trending towards one explanation over the other. This investigation is headed in a particular direction. But that doesn’t mean at a certain point we can stop it and turn in another direction on a dime.”

The hacks wanted to know about the possibility of supernatural intervention. As John Martling was not a priest what they wanted from him was the certain knowledge that it was *not* so. Which, of course, he could not provide to them. Above this, they all wanted to know what it meant. They were barking up the wrong tree asking a cop such a question. He didn't know from supernature and didn't care. The philosophical-spiritual implications of what was going on were irrelevant. Perhaps it was attributable to an extraterrestrial presence in the area who thought it amusing or interesting to give the local yokels a fright. To Martling, such an off-the-reservation explanation was as good as no explanation at all. He thought a satisfactory type of

closure for the case would be one where there would be no more questions asked about it. Then he could write a report and be debriefed about the whole matter. And move onto something else in a less rustic part of the world entirely.

Basically, he was alone amongst all those many thousands here in Delacorte attracted by the Returnees. In that he was the one person indifferent to what it all meant.

“If you ask me,” he said to G.I. Hung who was the only local officer who had bothered to remain through the conference, “we should just shake the tree by arresting all parties concerned and sort out the civil liberties of the accused later. Let ‘em defend themselves if they’re so willing. That way we’ll arrive at the truth sooner. They’ll have to open their mouths that way at least to their lawyers. And at that point we’ll have an answer about their status of *compos mentis*, if nothing else.”

According to G.I. Hung, the four Returnees talked all the time, but mostly in a language all their own creation.

“Their words have a certain similarity to them, like they rehearsed it or something at some point,” he told John. “We made some recordings of it and gave it to a linguist at the U of I. He said Sanskrit, maybe. Or maybe some sort of Sanskrit pre-cursor. He said he’s in the midst of transcribing and comparing them now. Maybe he could make sense of it and talk back to them at some point,” he said. “On the other hand, they all seem to understand English at some level at some point. Occasionally they quote old commercials for body care products from the 70’s. Occasionally it’s stupid lists as if pulled from an almanac. They say these things and don’t seem to know what they mean. As if somebody above is working their mouths for them.

They say it a couple times then stay quiet. As if they scratched the itch and they could move on."

According to John, that '72 Suns roster was talent-laden but underachieving. Could have made the finals if they played defense. But they played no defense. So, they were condemned to ignominy for all time.

Gerald Hung thought it weird that the Returnees went to such detail.

"If they're con artists, they're organized con artists," he said, "with an unclear goal. And realize, we've got hidden cameras on 'em and they haven't broken character once. We try and surprise 'em and they don't break character, don't even fucking flinch, pardon my French. Which I suppose is neither here nor there."

The file on the case that Martling had been looking at on and off for the past few days was currently open on his MacBook Air.

"Four subjects of investigation," he said to G.I. Hung and tried his best to recall their names from memory. As that tab of the spreadsheet was not open at the moment. "Herbert Dice, Robert Stimson, Satish Patel, Margery Knudson. I think I'm right in claiming, officer, they're all natives to the area, all born within the tri-county area that lies between the Cedar and Mississippi Rivers on the west and east and the Minnesota border to the north."

Officer Hung dug into the backpack he had taken to carrying around with him. He was searching for his spiral notebook.

"Satish Patel," he said to Martling. "Satish Patel, I don't have any intel on beyond the basic facts."

"I can fill in the blanks for you," Martling said, recalling the government search he had conducted on the Returnees just before taking off for the airport. "Satish Patel. Native of Waterloo, Iowa, that bustling dump we drove through on the way up

here," he said. "Father was a mathematician at the University of Northern Iowa, mother stayed home and sewed. But they're both dead now, see, and poor Satish! There's nobody to become alarmed over his recent spate of good health. And observe the coincidence: that there's nobody still alive to become alarmed over these freaks. Helen Dice, officer, being the exception that proves the rule. Helen Dice, you see, had become alarmed only on *a single occasion* over her son Herbert's return. But she has an arrest record herself and is somebody devoid of credibility from the FBI's perspective. So where are all the good people of Iowa when you most need them to raise a ruckus and demand the truth?" John asked. "Where are all the salt of the earth types you constantly hear about existing out here? Midwesterners with common sense and so forth. They're as silent as the graves these losers claim to have crawled out of. Because at first blush to read these cases it's all a giant fiction. At least now it's a giant fiction. Nobody can really claim much about the undocumented past as it's too much of an abstraction. But, as of now, there's not much to say for the place. I mean, the whole fucking state. And it ain't even winter yet with the blizzards and the freezing rain and all the rest."

John Martling had a pipe, an old hickory bought on a whim while in England to scratch a Sherlock Holmes fetish. In times of burgeoning frustration, the pipe was produced from his lapel. When not lit it was held in his hand professorially as if he was Albert Einstein contemplating a formula on an invisible blackboard in front of him.

"Can I smoke in here?" he asked the implacable G.I. Hung. He stared at the tin of Captain Black that was suddenly noticed on the table in front of him as if the universe was begging him to light up. Maybe it was all a grand coincidence. Or maybe, more likely,

he was responding to an unconscious visual cue that the tin had triggered in him. Because he wasn't for the most part so impulsive about his puffing. He liked to smoke, for example, just after attending a particularly gruesome autopsy. He felt that it neutralized the nightmare visions that invariably appeared on such occasions like a priest with a smoke pot. He saw a purifying aspect to the practice. He felt that afterward he was less a part of the grossness beheld and more a passive observer at a remove. Therefore, at a remove of the harm it caused.

The tobacco tin was half opened which caused Martling to speculate somebody had left it there when being confronted with the attempt to access the tobacco inside it. He (or she maybe) was shamed into giving it up with the intention of coming back for it at some later time. Some other event had intervened in the meantime and made the tobacco a secondary concern. John could see all this unfolding even as he considered it in real time. He thought it strange that there had been even one person with some sort of panicked reaction to subsequent events. Somebody had seen something and believed in what he or she witnessed. As a dedicated pipe smoker, Martling found it unimaginable that somebody would abandon their tobacco in a careless way. This Captain Black, furthermore, was the herb with the highest nicotine level in the industry. He thought at worst somebody in the local Delacorte force had intentionally separated the user from their drug. But if this was so, it wouldn't have been casually misplaced but thrown away. Those who noticed it were treating it as another person's property. Which pointed to the notion that sooner or later it would be reclaimed by him or her.

Turning to Hung, John thought to ask to whom the tin belonged. This was before realizing that the information would be provided to him eventually by the investigatory flow. The facts would be discovered. He would only need to filter the information provided to him. He would not be prejudiced against one person if a name had been provided in advance. There was a difference, after all, between gullibility and guilt. He thought the pipe smoker could be cajoled into coming around to averring the FBI's version of events. To do so, John would have to treat him or her with kid gloves. And make it clear that his or her testimony was being believed even as it was being discounted and poured into a more socially acceptable narrative.

The tiny police station lacked a proper conference room. So, Deputy Director Martling commandeered the AWOL sheriff's office for a proper briefing.

"I'll state the facts as I understand them, and you tell me if I'm wrong or right about any of 'em," John said to Hung after pocketing the Captain Black. "After which you and I and agent Makamba can take a drive through town to the hospital or containment facility or whatever you're calling it nowadays for a one-on-one with the subjects. I would like to see what I'm dealing with before I go back to the hotel. If none of them will look me in the eye, I'll have you hold their head still and I'll look them in the eye just to spite them. At which point maybe we'll finally get somewhere with this investigation. For better or worse we'll have the answers we need at that point. Because that's one of my many skills, I'll have you know: the ability to read people. I don't think they can hide any secrets from me effectively if they're even willing to do so. Maybe they can and I've always been blind to it. Or maybe they don't know anything about their condition to begin with. So this

is a place to start in the investigation. We can find out why this is."

Director Martling had as ever committed the relevant facts of the case to memory. But because he had just met officer Hung, he made a show of consulting his laptop for the intel.

"Well, let's see," he said to G.I., referring to those Returnees, "of the four, we have death certificates reclaimed from them certifying dates of death between 1997 and 2015. Correct?"

G.I. Hung had an even greater recall of case facts than John. He had no intention of trying to impress his dotted line boss by making use of his spiral notebook.

"The first one, Dice," he said to Martling, "had the most recent expiration date. But the other three lack a chronological order. According to our medical examiner, even an embalmed body should long since be stripped to the bones within nine years of internment. And that's only two of the four who have met that criteria."

John had heard frequently from his own pathologists in Quantico that the preservatives in modern human diets forestalled body decay by years. Of course, this was not relevant to the matter at hand. Just because a corpse still had some meat on it didn't mean really it was a greater candidate for moving around than a biology class skeleton.

As far as the advertising copy that the Returnees seemed to spout in short bursts, the saved transcripts shed no light whatsoever on the mystery.

"It's all physical stuff for the most part," John said. "Products for old men and old women made to make themselves look good. Or at least make themselves feel better."

Hung had not given this angle any consideration.

“If it was an ad for car polish,” he said to Director Martling, “why would that matter in the slightest?”

Maybe this was a psycho-spiritual message intended for posterity but rendered in a completely obtuse way. Then again, these ad slogans were a classic investigative red herring that might well have been created collectively by those presently quarantined subjects to encourage the unfruitful speculation that he was engaged in presently. Experienced cops should have known better, but there you have the weirdness of this case in a nutshell. Crazy theories called out to investigators as if God-ordained. It finally made them look like fools when these theories were ultimately discredited.

As conceived of by Martling, likely the best course in dealing with this situation, hardly a case, was to eliminate no lead, even as the investigation was progressively narrowed to a sharp point.

“You do an anagram of any of their names ever? You ever think of that?” John asked G.I.

“No,” Officer Hung told him.

“That’s good, that’s real good,” John Martling said while attempting to suppress the involuntary smile that was trying to form. “Because if the answer was given in an anagram, it would still be a mystery to us as detectives. And why would we ever go looking for another mystery to solve?” he asked Hung.

Slowly Hung asked Martling why he asked him about it in the first place.

“We’ve got a helluva lot of time to kill before I’m allowed to go home,” he told him. “Just trying to get the lay of the land with you to see what you do and do not believe in. And get you to buy in to the truth that, from the perspective of secular authority, some mysteries must be allowed to perish

under the weight of their own paradoxes. We can create a case all on our own at any time," he said. "But that's not what I'm interested in doing just now. Just now, we have time enough to poke around. And we shouldn't be afraid about drawing any conclusion as long as it's speculative. Nothing will go into any official report until the end. And, even then, that's my problem more than yours. As I'm the one who will be taken to task for its contents."

The only fact concerning the four Returnees that John was mildly interested in confirming with Hung was if they were all, as had been claimed, suicides.

This time G.I. rooted through the pages of his hitherto closed notebook.

"Three of them we have on good authority that this is the case," he said to Martling after a minute. "By hanging, by drug overdose, by shotgun blast to the forehead in reverse chronological order," he said. "The fourth, Patel, we don't know because the family won't admit anything. They interred the body before the Medical Examiner had a chance to perform an autopsy. Claiming religious rights."

Satish Patel one day in 2008 had announced to his wife that he was going to work but never arrived. His body was found at the steps of the local water tower after he had either jumped or been pushed from its summit.

He was unemployed at the time, having lost his job at an insurance firm after the first wave of the Great Recession made itself known around these parts.

"He didn't leave a note or anything," Martling said. "At least not a note that was reclaimed. And in a situation like this you don't want to jump to conclusions."

To Hung, it now seemed an ordinary investigation of an extraordinary circumstance. To him, proper police conduct in this matter was impossible. He assumed, therefore, Martling was merely ladling fresh chum to the media sharks. Patel's suicide would have made a nice tidbit, a tantalizing false corridor beautifully adorned that he could repurpose for the wretches of the Fourth Estate to suggest a bit of closure to the mystery. Maybe a suicide cult with access to the supernatural? Of course, Martling wouldn't suggest that this was the case. He wouldn't have to. Merely, he would just state the facts in a certain way and let imaginations run wild. But if it turned out only three of the four were dead by their own hand, well, here was an incongruity. Rational types would be quick to rush in with a charge of investigatory malpractice. Not that anybody but Sam Makamba was intent on investigating a goddamn thing in this affair. Somehow the secret of the FBI's at-root helplessness needed to be preserved. The Feds needed to be seen as the citadel of supreme competency even as no firm results were dredged up. They would be accused of a cover-up eventually. Which was better than the alternative of being accused of irrelevance.

Hung thought Martling was every bit as cynical as he apparently wanted to be seen by the locals. Thus, the sound of disappointment in his voice seemed real when the news of Returnee Patel's uncertain demise was communicated by Hung. He genuinely sounded like he had wanted to go four for four. He wanted to have a narrative to move on in the ensuing weeks if only to provide reassurance to himself that progress was being made.

Which was not to say the FBI couldn't and shouldn't assume that Satish Patel had done himself in. If they assumed this, a pattern would be

established. At which point a certain logical progression could be brought forward. For instance, maybe the Returnees had all been exposed to a psychoactive substance that had driven them to killing themselves. There was something in the Iowa air that revived even as it depressed. At which point the EPA could be brought in to execute a series of prolonged tests for years. They'd write an inconclusive report, and everything would be forgotten. Somewhat. Because, as the reporters Martling had just left might have said to each other, this was a story with "legs." Over a month in it was going strong. As with so much of modern life, the internet was principally to blame. Martling thought the best the FBI could do was blunt the story's cutting edge slightly. He thought really there was no real escape from it until enough layers of history had been placed between it and the present for folks to be only duly obsessed by it. And this could be measured in decades, not years.

Best case for everybody would be that the Returnees clawed their way back into the presently cordoned off graves they supposedly emerged from. At which point the entire affair could be attributed to mass hallucination. Various explanations for this would be created. The physical evidence of the so-called miracle would have disappeared, and nobody would be insistent about reviving the case at that point.

John Martling thought that in the short term the physical evidence had to be addressed. It was obvious that there had to be some cause to the resurrections. A set of circumstances had occurred, and those circumstances were still in place likely. So, the phenomenon wouldn't just reverse itself as if it was a motor being placed into reverse. It was blind to the reason for its own existence. Therefore, it was all the less able to simply be cajoled into

vanishing altogether. It would have to be taken apart piece by piece and buried some place impenetrably deep then forgotten about.

He thought maybe a contingency plan to take the Returnees to some sort of Area 51-type installation for further study/quarantine was a good idea. It hadn't progressed to that stage yet as the Feds were still hopeful after a righteous debunking. The dread of all parties concerned was that this was merely the tip of the iceberg. During the meeting Martling had asked Officer Hung six times if there had been reports of any suspicious activity around the graveyard. They had set up a twenty-four-hour surveillance system that captured every square inch of the facility. They had put seismic sensors in places they felt to be strategic locations to detect any strange movement underground and see exactly what was taking place.

Now, imagine if you were one of the relatives of these freaks and arrived home one day to find such an abomination at your kitchen table making pantomime gestures indicating that it wanted something to slake its thirst.

"Did we ever get the results of an MRI?" John Martling asked officer Hung on the way over to the hospital. The medical experts he talked to in Washington claimed that a full body scan would be the most reliable way to test in this instance. But somehow it had not yet been attempted. Must have been some issue with consent, Martling figured. One of the relatives must have thought that the Returnees had been poked and prodded enough.

Indeed, the only MRI machine in town was on the fritz. Repairs were moving slowly as expected, given that Delacorte was at the end of most medical supply chains.

"Nearest one's in Waterloo," Hung said, as usual taking great care with his driving. "But we

thought we'd rather wait for the one we have to be fixed than try and transport. Also, they would need to be restrained prior to having one of them strapped into the tube. We tried tranquilizing them, tried slipping something into their food every so often but nothing happens. They do not, as far as anybody has observed, sleep. Occasionally they close their eyes, usually while standing straight and go into a kind of trance. Their stools are composed principally of the remains of the live birds they eat. Yes, only live birds. It took us weeks to figure out that this was the case," Hung said. "And when they shit," he said, "they shit wherever they might. They have no shame sense, anything like that," he said. "They would walk around naked at all hours if we allowed it. And they seem to stink no matter how much sanitizer we use on them or scrub under their fingernails or what have you. The rot comes from within obviously. And so, what's anybody going to do about that?"

In saying this, Hung was trying to prepare the Deputy Director for the vulgar sights that lay ahead. But only in a limited way because he sensed Martling would not react to anything he saw regardless. The Deputy Director seemed completely hardened to so much of life already, dead to it as if these Returned and he had a kinship that needed to be explained in detail to be understood by an outsider. Upon seeing each other, John and a Returnee might actually embrace like reunited comrades. They had all been made aware of some fundamental truth of which only Martling could put into words.

Once in the hospital parking lot, Martling couldn't help noticing the sparse police presence at the facility.

"Your boss got something more important brewing than this case, I imagine," he said to Hung

as they exited the cruiser. “I count three cop cars belonging to the Delacorte P.D., not including yours. Maybe there’s a high school parade that would drain all resources that he’s anticipating,” Martling said. “He don’t wanna juice the overtime any, I’m guessing. So, he’s keeping a low profile.”

Actually, it was Sam Makamba following in the small convoy behind them who had given the order to local peace enforcement to keep a low profile at least at this facility.

“We didn't want to make it seem like any of the Returned had done something wrong,” Sam told the Deputy Director as an explanation. “The families are getting lawyered up. We didn't think there was any violent tendencies on display. You got four cops and eight FBI. Probably it’s more than enough as there’s no real police work on-going anyway.”

All the aspects of the case that bothered John seemed to begin and end with Sam Makamba.

“What does he want any of us to do?” Martling asked himself and wondered after the wisdom of asking officer Hung for a snort of whatever was available. The officer didn't seem the type to carry a flask on him during working hours, so he demurred. But he and Mike Kay’s first destination once out of town would be the nearest shitkicker bar. He wouldn’t want to wait until he was back in the hotel. There was a bleakness to this situation that had suddenly been made known to him. And his defense against it all was to drink.

This facility was one of the network of rural community hospitals so under strain at the end of Obama’s last term that it seemed a place more along the lines of a free clinic in a breakaway Soviet satellite than a modern American hospital.

Cleanliness Begins at Home read the sign just above the cordoned off wing they were headed into. This was a message aimed at hospital employees

who were constantly being requested to refrain from using hospital sanitation facilities as much as possible. They wanted workers to bring their own bottles of Purell, for example, and use it on themselves constantly. They were constantly giving instruction to medical staff about the proper way to sneeze and to bring their own Kleenex for use throughout the day. There was constant monitoring over hospital-acquired bacterial infections. But they were fighting a losing battle. And the list of effective antibiotics to be marshalled against the enemy was dwindling daily.

Maybe the clinic should be shuttered completely after the investigation had been completed and a restraining fence built around it. The EPA could declare it a toxic zone and appropriate the funds to build another hospital that served the community miles away.

If another resurrection or two happened, this would likely be the prevailing sentiment. Likely there was no threat at all of contagion, but people would not react with any sort of reason when in the face of what the internet would term a zombie epidemic. They would want the animate bodies and everything that touched them destroyed. Even after the first man dug himself out of the local cemetery, nobody thought this was vaguely possible. Slowly wonderment and awe were souring to ordinary terror. Martling saw his job principally to contain the pathogen of fear rather than some sort of imagined zombie strain. He knew which one was more dangerous. He thought of himself in this regard as a public health advocate.

In whatever filmic treatment of subsequent events, the Returnees would likely be condoned in an ultra-sleek airtight room replete with sliding glass doors and a dedicated filtration/scrubber system of the sort that existed on a space station.

“You bought these supplies at Home Depot, I’m assuming,” John said to the haggard-looking doctor who greeted him at the wing entrance pointing to the duct tape and plastic tarp job that acted as a barrier between the wooden door and the hall. “Better than nothing, I’m assuming,” he said, though this was debatable. It might provide a false sense of security to those standing outside the hallway. John noticed that even the doctor was not wearing a HEPA mask let alone a true anti-biotic filter. So, what was the fricking point of the tarp? If the doctors thought that there was no contagion possible, why use it? Perhaps this was a little social conditioning merely, a prominent object designed to give hospital staff reassurance. But if this was the case, at the very least the securing tape could have been swapped out occasionally. Fully half of it was curled over itself, securing absolutely nothing. Within another day, the entire structure would collapse.

Before walking in, John Martling made a mental note to rip the tarp down himself on the way out. He would hand it to the presiding physician and tell him, as regarded his precautionary measures, to shit or get off the pot.

“In some situations, half measures are worse than no measures at all,” he told the doc and walked into Room 1 without knocking. Hung had already alerted him to what he might behold therein. But he went in anyway with an open mind, believing eyewitness testimony in such a case to be profoundly unreliable.

Sitting straight up on the bed above the sheets was Patient Zero, Herbert Dice, clutching the remnants of a captivity-raised pigeon that had been given to him hours before.

“You performed an EEG on this man,” John said to the doctor. All the time he held his gaze steady on the patient’s face.

After Fuzzy’s admittance, the doctors had provided him with what they assumed as proper medical care for somebody in his condition. They had sewn up the wormy holes in his face, for example. They had fitted him with the type of metal halo given to patients with a broken neck. Soon it had been obvious he didn’t need the halo. As it was obvious his broken neck was healing by itself. Fuzzy didn’t drink, didn’t crave water. So, they had given him an IV with the same solution that a deathbed patient received. Apart from this there was no medical intervention ongoing with Patient Zero.

The EEGs were performed a few days ago. They revealed that the Returnees were as a group putting out brain waves identical to inebriates at the apex of their inebriation.

“They can’t seem to snap themselves out of it,” the doc, name of Rabelais, told Martling regarding the finding. “Brain functioning’s inhibited, but it’s an ON and OFF phenomenon,” he said. “Which explains how they’re sometimes able to speak. The wave goes up and they attempt to communicate certain truths about their experience. And then the wave goes down and they’re silent again. The brain seems to be repairing itself,” he said, “or at least morphing into something different. Time will tell if they will revert back to something like normal. Probably at some point they’ll be able to carry on a conversation to at least tell us what they want. They might be able to describe their experience in such a way that we can figure out what happened to them. But I don’t think they’ll ever be all the way back. I don’t think really you could ever look at any of them and not be able to pick them out from ordinary folks.”

The EEG results had been forwarded to various brain specialists across the country. But they had nothing to add to this diagnosis. They had theories to offer which were often contradictory or merely generic. Being experts in their field, they couldn't ever bring themselves to mouth the words "I don't know." They were mystified and fearful that their learning brought them no closer to any truth about this event than the learning of a cabalist might. Science failed in this matter absent of any revolutionary theory. They desperately needed to divine the truth even if it was a religious truth only. They needed to know what was happening in Delacorte beyond their inability to even scratch the surface of the mystery. From their perspective it was best that they were not consulted about it any longer. Like everybody else they were waiting to be given an off-ramp to the problem. They were looking to the likes of Deputy Director Martling to disguise the dark miracles of northern Iowa. They needed an official indication that all the data they had been handed was fraudulent. Which would allow them to sleep better at least. As any contradictory piece of evidence regarding the universe's unreflective nature could be forgotten eventually. They wouldn't need to wrestle with the facts' uncanny nature anymore. They could simply not recall them at once.

With this in mind, it was Dr. Rabelais' strong recommendation that the four Returnees be discharged from this facility by week's end. As nothing further could be done for them.

"We're a medical facility, not Gitmo," he told Martling, trying out his oft-rehearsed line on him. If John Martling understood the allusion, he was doing his best to hide the knowledge from view. As he was a law enforcement official, not a fucking witch doctor. *Every* official was out of his element here.

And just whining about it constantly wasn't going to make this reality vanish.

Borrowing Dr. Rabelais' penlight, John Martling inspected Fuzzy's left eye. This was after securing the top of his head in one overlarge palm.

"Don't matter to me, friend, whether you squirm or not," he said to the creature. He detected only a slight flinching after he grabbed him. If Fuzzy had fought back, it would have meant that he was more alive than dead. The seeming docility that this freak evinced in the face of being manhandled like this was disturbing to John. To him, it seemed to affirm the notion that he was of the dead and made animate by some supernatural process independent of biological cause.

Minimal pupillary light reflex here which John supposed would be ascribed to the brain damage that Dr. Rabelais had noted on the EEG. But though he was not an expert, Martling detected something else when he peered inside the muddy iris, some sort of conscious recognition in the eye about what was being done to it and why.

"*You need to have confidence in an adult undergarment...*," Fuzzy Dice began to say and was stopped in mid-pitch but a heavy slap across his left cheek by Martling's right palm. Fuzzy collapsed onto the medical bed and bowed his back and opened his mouth wide as if to complain about the injustice to deaf heaven. No sound came out as a result. So, it seemed to John the silence itself was protest, a kind of audible negation that protested against the demand he had made of the creature to make sense of its own absurd existence. The silent scream lasted for a minute before the muscles in the creature's body relaxed gradually and the mouth closed. After that, the *status quo ante* was resumed. There was a lot of shifty eyes evinced by the patient

along with the odd bit of the exotic language of the dead that was so noteworthy about them.

Turning to Rabelais, John Martling asked if he had any problem with the rough treatment he had just witnessed.

“Not particularly,” Dr. Rabelais said, realizing he was dealing with an *ultimo hombre*. He might as well have lodged a protest with Jesus Christ as lodged a protest with John’s superior for all the good that it would do. Aside from this he was indifferent about the well-being of these zombies. He didn’t see the humanity in them. He felt he had been wrongly assigned to their care. Maybe a veterinarian would have been a better fit, or at least some tech well versed enough in the rudiments of animal husbandry to see to the Returnees’ continued sustenance and the elimination of any communicable diseases that they might contract along the way. He had no idea what would become of them after leaving the hospital and he didn’t care. They seemed to him biologically unstable somehow despite their recuperative powers. He sensed that they were not long for this world even though they demonstrated a tendency toward immortality. Nature abhorred them even as they thrived. They didn’t seem part of this world at all.

He thought the only way to deal with the Returnees was to kill them or try to kill them and bury them in a coffin secure enough to forestall the possibility of yet another re-appearance into the land of the living.

“We don’t know what we’re dealing with here,” said Dr. Rabelais to Director Martling. He was stating the obvious. For true men of action, a lack of deep knowledge did not prove an impediment in times of crisis. Presently Rabelais spoke just to prove real human beings still held dominion in this realm. The mystery language of the dead was

proving too difficult to deal with in silence. He would walk out of the room when they started with the lingo on other occasions.

On the skin above Fuzzy's jugular notch, the u-shaped space separating sternum from neck, two Hebrew letters were suddenly visible raised from the skin due to the sudden rush of blood from the area.

"*Aleph, Tav*," Martling said peering down to see them in the room's poor light. Each letter was no larger than a third of a size of a fingernail. "Do you know what this means?" he asked Dr. Rabelais.

What he meant to ask him was *have you seen this before*? But by this time the doctor had one foot out the door and was leaning against the failing plastic. He was sick of such visionary shit bigtime. It had nothing to do whatsoever about what they had taught him in medical school.

Chapter Three: Dead City

Radio

I.

From the perspective of the FBI, during the eighteen months John Martling had been assigned to the case, not a single positive turn of events was encountered.

“Temple, Michigan,” Jameson Frederick said to his boyfriend Michael Kay one soggy spring morning in their Cedar Lake home. “But where is it anyway? Except in Michigan. And where in Michigan anyway?”

Make a mitt of your left-hand, Mike told him, and you could locate the town of Temple on the top knuckle of your thumb. There, they had a Jonagold apple museum purported to display the world’s largest Jonagold apple of three pounds four ounces. It was preserved in formaldehyde. There, they had a fishing tourism industry servicing Saginaw Bay gone on hard times ever since the inexplicable implementation in 2009 of strict quotas on the walleye that swam in from Lake Huron.

So it was that talk of Temple, Michigan had come to the fore at Mike and Jameson’s breakfast table once the announcement of Returnee fifty had

been made. It had occurred in the town's quaint civil war-era cemetery. This corpse, a thirty year's dead marine named Fred Wise, had, in a painfully elongated manner, emerged from the tiny family mausoleum where he had been stored. The marine's survivors, fearing that a play for renewed life would be made by one of their brutish kin, had barred the mausoleum door by means of a heavy circular padlock of the sort found on storage units. Fred couldn't break this, so he had taken to crawling out of the mausoleum's eight inch stained-glass-skylight window that the family had disremembered even existed. Staring at it, no one would have guessed anything larger than a toddler could extract itself from its parameters. Fred's family didn't reckon on the fantastic abilities death conferred to a body. Returnees were able to break their bones as if they were made of soggy cardboard and reset them at a future point with seeming no harm to their renewed life force.

It took Fred Wise the better part of several days to remove himself from the mausoleum's contours. But once he had, he became content to sit cross-legged in the nearby Wal-Mart's parking lot and feast on a landlocked starling he had trapped with an upturned shopping cart. At this point, the locals were more awe-struck at a Returnee's presence than terrified. They had buried Wise with his dog tags so they could identify him by name readily. The padlocking family did not wish to claim him as theirs for some reason. So emergency services were contacted and off he was rushed to the local quarantine facility on the outskirts of Saginaw.

Not that rising from the dead was an occurrence to be blasé about. The phenomenon still seemed noteworthy to both Mike and Jameson as they lingered over store bought cannoli taken with green tea. On the other hand, no information of any

significance was carried to them by the report of Returnee fifty. Their minds were a becalmed Sargasso forced into hibernation long ago by internet overstimulation. A man rising from the grave was just another weird thing that happened in the world like a Yeti sighting. It had happened before and would happen again. But that didn't mean others should have been so blasé about it.

“We should go as a lark just to see the giant apple,” Jameson said to Mike, who he was of late, truth be told, disenchanted with. He lit an elongated cigarette. Gauloises, these were, product of France. These in all honesty weren’t any better tasting than any American brand they replaced. They had merely provided a certain style to its user unavailable to your ordinary Marlboro puffer. And style, quoth Wilde, will always triumph in the end. Don’t ask Jameson how he came by the Gauloises in a place where unfrozen avocados were hard to come by. His supply line to the continent was secret, as was so much of his personal life. He would routinely be introduced as Mike’s roommate, for example, to all parties, whether they looked like homophobes or not. Hard to say what their opinions were of French cigarettes, let alone sodomy. Jameson believed even now there was a law on the state books of Iowa outlawing the latter. He believed he would leave Iowa soon enough, regardless if Mike was in tow.

The town in Michigan at second glance seemed even more off the beaten track than Delacorte. Thus, it might provide Jameson the opportunity to simply ditch his boyfriend and take off to the nearest international airport in search of a cheap European flight. In France, Jameson believed, they treated their fags well (whenever the Muslim population was not trying to kill them). He supposed in Paris he would be able to smoke Gauloises as he

wished whilst arm in arm with a man walking through an *arrondissement*. This might not have been exactly true, but this was his understanding. He thought it would be an altogether more civilized way of life up until the time the Muslim hordes seized power over there. At which point, God willing, he would be extremely far away, having seen the inexorable march of Islamofascism from a clear distance. Until that time he would execute evasive maneuvers. It would be worth the risk, he thought, if only for the sense of adventure the trip would confer. He did not, for example, speak a word of French. Oh, it would be picked up effortlessly! He thought this was an inevitable occurrence. When considering such matters, Jameson was providing details to a dream. He thought once in Europe he never would be lonely or bereft of somebody to talk to even though he was ignorant of so much.

Out here in “the provinces,” as he liked to say, people talked to Jameson Frederick all the time. But he was deeply suspicious of their intentions and usually demurred when any further contact was sought.

“I think we should just pull up stakes and go,” he told Mike. “I mean to Michigan or anywhere else,” he said. “If only to screw our landlord, whatshisface. He seems in the midst of pulling something over on us. I think we need to beat him to it,” Jameson said. “I mean, the other day he was over here jabbering about some nonsense,” he said. “But I could tell there was something else on his mind. He wouldn’t leave when I gave him every opportunity to do so. He kept staring past us into our domicile. As if there was something in there for him.”

Mike thought this was paranoia on Jameson’s part. He told him to stop making such accusations, at least out loud.

“We have so few friends here as it is,” he said to him truthfully but stopped short of saying: *because we’re queer*. He didn’t know if this was the truth. And unlike Jameson he was unprepared to think the worst of his neighbors straight off. It might have been merely that they weren’t the fun-loving approachable couple they imagined themselves to be deep down. Maybe people in this community were naturally suspicious of outsiders due to the run of bad luck they had endured of late. Could have been a combination of these things certainly. Or maybe they were just hypersensitive and couldn’t see through Iowans’ natural reticence and forgive them for it.

Eventually Mike in his new capacity as the FBI Deputy Director’s attaché would have to travel to Temple, Michigan if only for a twenty-four-hour turnaround.

“They got him in a jail some place, in a detention center that used to be a school,” Mike said to Jameson of Fred Wise’s animate corpse. “He’s a war hero I heard, something like that. And if word gets out that’s where the FBI’s holding him there’ll be hell to pay,” he said. “I mean, it’s turned, the public opinion of the Returnees in the past few months,” Mike Kay said to Jameson. “Now opinion’s against the powers-that-be and pro-dead.” He said this to Jameson with a note of mystery in his voice. “For a while, for the first few months at least, people were all scared about the world ending. They wanted protection from God even as they prayed to Him night and day. Now they’re all looking at those who have come back as heroes. They think they’ve arrived with a message from the beyond for everybody. They’re trying to tell us something to save us. And they think the FBI and the media are in cahoots with each other. They think there’s an epic cover-up ongoing.”

While saying “they,” Mike was referring particularly to president-elect Donald Trump. He in turn was constantly threatening to launch an investigation against all parties concerned. Nobody on the inside knew what could be done to mollify him. Trump was the ultimate insider posing as an outsider taking up the flag of ultimate outsiders. During the election he had visited Delacorte and pointed to the cordon around the hospital like it was the fucking Berlin Wall.

“Something must be done about all this!” DJT told the Hawkeye throng who had arrived to support him. And now something was in the midst of being done. According to Trump, all the Returnees were salt of the earth “real” Americans. Their debasement at the hands of the government was an on-going outrage. Build walls on the Mexican border, not up in Delacorte! It was all simple and rousing stuff. And Hillary Clinton could not be roused from her Hamptons coma to offer a counterpoint.

The Bureau and its beleaguered Director needed a bit of good news just then if only to allow him to keep one step ahead of a gathering lynch mob.

“We’ll get him the hell out of the jail and maybe into a hotel somewhere and dress him up in a real army uniform and have President Trump pin a medal on his chest,” Mike said to Jameson using this coffee table discussion as an impromptu planning meeting of one. Of late, Mike wasn’t getting much direction from Deputy Director Martling. Having spent the first part of his career after graduating college in the hospitality industry, Mike always felt nervous plotting his own course. He would welcome input from either John or the glowering Sam Makamba in whose company he found himself working nowadays. When he finally made a

noticeable mistake, he was certain to receive an earful from Sam concerning his lack of adherence to the chain of command. But nothing of the sort ever happened.

With the Temple, Michigan Returnee, for example, he was absolutely in over his head. He had absolutely no idea about the direction that the Bureau wished to proceed. A month earlier Mike had been given a vague mission statement by John Martling. This was to preserve the illusion of competence on the part of the investigators at all costs. And that was all. Even then Martling could see the winds of public opinion shifting against them. All the peasants with pitchforks who had voted Trump in were now directing their fire unto the present government's handling of the (literal) uprising in the Midwest. Breitbart.com was daily opining in thinly disguised journalistic works and linking the uprisen to the plight of disenfranchised auto workers. This was a tendentious connection at best. But it didn't stop them from positing it. And when news leaked of war hero Fred Wise's being interred in a rural Michigan prison, they would switch their bullshit detectors up to a whole new level. Maybe there was some connection between the dead rising and the Clinton Foundation's inattentiveness (to put it mildly) to the people of Haiti. In today's journalism, accusations were rendered as hypotheses. These hypotheses would require supportive evidence only at some future moment.

Nobody said as much to Mike Kay, but it was obvious he was functioning as a type of stalking horse for the FBI. He was an intermediary between them and an America that had slid off the rails for good. It had taken Rome centuries to fall according to the historian Gibbon. But the American Empire seemed in the middle of destroying itself over a half-decade. This was a kind of progress, when

viewed from a cold distance. No future historian would ever look at the Americans and declare them pikers in relation to the human condition's darker impulses. But Mike Kay was only twenty-eight, in love with a glorious boy, and largely unaffected by the common dread. He thought it was deeply unfair that he had to go to the prison near Temple alone. And by alone he meant unaccompanied by his man. He thought his relationship with Jameson would not survive the separation, if only to judge by the dirty looks that was shot his way whenever the trip was discussed in their breakfast nook.

He hoped against hope that this case was a false alarm like the Returnee in Devil's Lake, North Dakota. This man was merely another copycat and victim of the oil glut who affected a grave countenance in hopes to land himself three square meals and a minor level of fame courtesy of a voracious press. Such cases were all made known within seventy-two hours once no match would occur between an established corpse and an animated one. Also, there was a divergence in typical behavior that was noted after careful observation. No mere live person could fake the Returnee penchant for staying awake indefinitely, for example, and their taste for live pigeon faded over time no matter how motivated they might be ultimately to sustain the ruse. Perhaps this Fred Wise was not the Fred Wise of the Vietnam-era. But if this was the case the hoax was immaculate owing to the exact military fatigues that Wise was buried in (somebody couldda exhumed the body and put the clothes on maybe) and the damage to the mausoleum window committed from the inside out. Really, the best thing for Mike to do would be to get there as quickly as he might, independent of John Martling. Once arrived, he should begin to threaten those in charge. They didn't know who he was and

how little experience he had in these matters. They would know him only as a representative of the FBI's lead investigator and, therefore, somebody vested with the power to come down hard on any local Barney Fife who seemed indifferent to the concept of civil rights, let alone their implementation.

"I'll buy a black suit and one-way glasses," Mike Kay said to Jameson. He was describing his future actions once he would arrive on scene in Temple. "I think the key is to talk rapid fire and give orders, not ask questions. If you want somebody to raise their hands up over their heads you come right up to them and say raise your hands. That's the accepted way. This is opposed to: *wouldn't you be nice if you did this*? I saw the real cops in action, and this is what they do. They're not so interested in getting buy-in from somebody they're in the process of bossing around. They need to get something done in the shortest time possible, They're not looking to make a new friend or a new hook-up. It's a defense mechanism basically and I didn't know this until I started working for them. Policing is a dangerous activity regardless of what branch of law enforcement you find yourself in. I don't think people appreciate this until they get a view of it from the inside. They're trying to control a potentially volatile situation. They have these bullet proof vests that field agents are sometimes required to wear. And nobody takes that into consideration when they dump on cops and call them all sort of names just for doing their job."

Coming from somebody with a Black Lives Matter t-shirt that existed some place deep in a bureau drawer, Jameson thought this was rich. He said as much to Mike in between attempts to blow a smoke ring. French cigarettes didn't produce smoke any more amenable to this difficult act than

American cigarettes. Hardly, though it didn’t stop Jameson from trying. *Write a note and just leave*, he thought, after wondering briefly if he even was obliged to write a note. He didn’t feel that he owed anybody an explanation for the way he felt about things. There were no vows uttered in this relationship. There was no reason to be guilty over an act that he had not foreswore in the first place.

The best way to leave is always on the sly, he felt. That way there would be no tear-filled scenes designed to get him to change his mind and stay.

“I’ll take you to the airport but won’t get on the plane with you,” Jameson said to Mike Kay describing his level of commitment for the sojourn to Temple. No, he didn't give a shit after the world’s largest Jonagold apple. He supposed it was there for viewing on the internet. He thought about the horrors of small-town life in general and the comforts that a big city afforded to gay folk. He wanted to be there, not here. He wanted to be single again and mixing as they say. He didn't give a damn what he had to do to achieve these goals.

In Chicago, two hundred miles away, there had been no Returnees to speak of. The Second City, Jameson supposed, was his ultimate destination. He had been scoping out apartments in its Logan Square neighborhood on the sly.

“It’s cheap living there at least relative to the coast,” Jameson had said to Mike the other day speaking abstractly of the city of broad shoulders and, in particular, Logan Square. He had heard the area was only moderately exposed to the mass of shootings that Chicago was suffering through now. A studio apartment could be had in Logan Square for less than a thousand a month, according to Craigslist. One unit was right over a Starbucks and right down the street (as per Google maps) from the type of tapas bar Jameson Frederick longed for. In

the Dear John letter that he might leave Mike, he would decline to say exactly where he had run off to. Likely Mike would put two and two together and consult an available Chicago phone directory (or whatever resources he had now as a G-man). Jameson would be sure to block all Iowa area codes from his iPhone in advance. He didn't appreciate even slightly the sort of queeny drama that was in the offing for him should he pick up one of these. He never said his love for Mike Kay was permanent or even deeply wrought. Look, he was at heart a whore. He never told Mike Kay he was anything but a whore. It didn’t make any sense to lie like that and in such a forthright way.

Mike would over time forget about him, obsessed as he was about the dead rising. And, in particular (and for some reason), about the resurrection of Frederick Wise.

There was something different about this one. This was Mike’s contention that invited further investigation. The Hebrew letter located just underneath Wise’s fourth rib was *Pe*, a symbol resembling an open mouth which was heretofore unreferenced by the hides of the other Returnees. This could signify that the message the cosmos or the Lord above or the devil below was trying to communicate was evolving. Or decaying into gibberish like the static at the end of a radio sign-off. Or as a prelude perhaps to the main event.

Whichever, there was something different about this one. The case seemed to require Mike Kay’s attention exclusively. Nobody else in the Bureau was taking it so seriously. He was seeing things that they weren’t, even after only two months on the job. It was truly demoralizing that Mike was presently the lead investigator on this case. Sam Makamba excluded, all the other agents seemed stuck in mud. John Martling was on a drunk somewhere in the

narrow bird sanctuary of an Iowa highway median. It was left, therefore, to Jameson and Mike to sort out the latest Midwestern return. But they were barely on speaking terms presently. So, Mike Kay was left to his own devices to try and figure out the way forward. Even though technically he had no authority to do so.

Presently, Mike was too distracted to pick up on Jameson's discontent much less do anything about it.

You don't mean what you are thinking, he would have said to his boyfriend if confronted with the evidence of his discontentment. Then he would have done his best to shove the entire conversation to the back of his mind. It needed to be forgotten, as he couldn't deal with it. He was completely numb to the possibility of breaking up. He simply didn't consider it, regardless of all the prodding.

Tomorrow or the next day he would place a call home from Temple and give Jameson a report about the case and when he was expected home. This was it as far as he knew. This was the only response required from him.

"More cream?" he asked Jameson. By this, he meant to ask whether Jameson bought more cream for them both. When no answer came, Mike fixated on the case. So much so that he did not see Jameson grab his coat and leave their townhouse. He heard a click at the door and thought it might be the wind pushing against the locked door. Or alternately he thought nothing of it.

He had a mind just before flying out to Detroit to consult a rabbi to research the letter *Pe*. He sensed that it was far important to this case than the mousy special agent who had been assigned to research such associations.

"*Pe* meaning mouth: a receptacle at a literal level," Sam Makamba told Mike Kay on the short

flight over from Cedar Lake when inexplicably they were seated in the same row. Makamba had of late shaven his head completely, which lent him an even more glowering presence than before. But suddenly, once removed from Deputy Director Martling's negative force field, he had become chatty. Unbeknownst to either Mike or John, he had been investigating the cases in a parallel fashion. Up until this moment, he wasn't prepared to share his findings with anybody. Which seemed to indicate to Mike that he was in need of assistance suddenly. He was preparing to take some sort of action. Maybe arrest somebody? But for what? That would have been career suicide at a spectacular level given the current political climate. Or maybe he had found something out.

According to Makamba, the letter *Pe* was composed of two other Hebrew letters, *Kaf* and *Yod*. *Kaf* being a container and *Yod* being synonymous with the divine spark of God. It seemed (at least to him) that the meaning of the designation was self-evident. It was a coded message signifying that Fred Wise was the conspiracy's ringleader. If not, he wouldn't have been marked in this way. Marked as the Mouth of God. He would have taken the ordinary designation of *Nun* or *Hey* that the other Returnees had used to identify themselves always around the neck area where the lettering was easier to access.

"It's a religious cult absolutely," Sam said, "that prior to this moment had been absent of a messianic leader."

Sam waited for the news to sink in before continuing. "They have a simple ring on-going where bodies are exhumed on the sly and then disposed of in some clever way," he said. "What they do is they take their places and use these Jew letters to tell the difference between one another. Maybe they have drugs on their person to give them

these weird affectations and brain waves. But up until this point the pattern had not been established, nor the chain of command. Now we have definitive proof about what's going on," Makamba said. "You have this code in the letter which signifies this person as a cult leader. Eventually he'll identify him as such. At which point we can swoop in. We can arrest him on grounds of cemetery desecration. Which is true given that there were glass shards found from the mausoleum window on his person. We could do it right now if we wanted, but we want to smoke him out first. He's going to need to send a signal at some point to his confederates. So, we have to intercept the signal. We have the advantage that he's now in jail. None of the victim's family has come forth to claim him. Pretty much he's ours to do with what we will. Up until the point that we close in and the justice department takes over for good."

Agent Makamba thought these zombie impersonators were at-root terrorists of some stripe. He thought they were attempting to destroy the nation's faith in its government.

"Look at the evidence and you'll see I'm right," Makamba said to Mike Kay leaning over in his seat. "You'll see how much of the perpetrators' behavior mirror each other exactly. Which points to a conspiracy, not a coincidence. It's simply a matter of catching them in the act. They are operating some sophisticated counter-surveillance program probably. Probably they have the government assistance of some foreign nation. Probably Israel (though I'll deny it if pressed to). Eventually people will drop to their knees and beg forgiveness to God in front of them. And when that happens, we're all lost completely."

This in not so many words was John Martling's view of the situation. From a distance it was hard to

see why he and Sam did not see eye to eye about so much. In a manner of speaking, Makamba was a true believer in supreme authority. Whereas Director Martling was an apostate concerning all systems of belief.

It was hard to claim that a phenomenon was merely criminal in such a situation where so many natural laws seemed to be forfeited.

Because why would these con artists go to the trouble to have fifty Returnees appear when five at most would have sufficed? The press was showing increasingly less interest in covering this sort of event. Hard to say what they gained drawing the first act out over so many months. They could have localized everything in Delacorte and have this zombie king (or whatever he was) make an appearance there rather than in a nowhere spot three hundred fifty miles to the northeast. Temple, Michigan was a village so remote even the natives of Michigan's thumb region likely had a difficult time placing it. Why there? If publicity was the overarching goal, why not NYC? And why be so cryptic about it? If those involved wanted to affect change, shouldn't a cogent message have been formed in advance of their appearance that they could all mouth at once? Rather than mouthing only gibberish? The effectiveness of a good ghost story, it seemed to Mike Kay, rested in the indefatigable intelligence of the otherworldly evil being encountered by the hero. A slothful, forgetful demon immediately was deflated of its terrifying aspect. Samuel Makamba likely would attribute such an error in storytelling to ordinary incompetence. Which, of course, argued against the narrative he was pressing of the Fred Wise impersonator as a diabolical genius. It was hard to see how geniuses made such simple mistakes. But for this too Sam had a series of rationalizations. He had no intention

of letting go his explanation regardless of how much contrary information appeared.

He thought himself a lone seeker of justice in this instance, battling the forces of darkness in front of him and the forces of sloth and corruption behind him amongst those who were technically his colleagues.

“I don’t know which side you are coming down on in this matter,” he said to Mike Kay and straightened up in his seat. As he spoke, a handwritten note from Helen Dice extricated itself from the agent’s front pocket. *Kill you if I see you*, was the note’s first fragmentary sentence. It was rendered in florid purple ink. It was directed at Makamba.

Mike always wondered how Sam had been allowed to keep his job with this attitude on display. Perhaps it had something to do with John Martling’s constant tippling. He imagined that the agent’s lack of social skills and his open insubordination landed him in hot water constantly. He didn’t seem very bright, in addition. Clearly whatever he had planned on doing once on scene in Michigan would be contraindicated regarding the FBI’s best interests. He was the sort that didn’t seem to require proof before promulgating a particular theory. Eventually he was going to violate somebody’s civil rights in an obvious enough way that would get him sacked. Mike was wondering how it had yet to happen.

Sam Makamba wanted to be left alone with Fred Wise long enough for an impression to be made.

“My orders are to get him released from police custody as soon as possible,” Mike said to agent Makamba. This wasn’t strictly true. In fact, John Martling had given no orders to anyone about anything. He seemed to want his agents to sustain the illusion of competence, exploiting the infinitesimal hope that the Returnees might vanish

just as they had appeared. Real police work was unwelcomed in this matter as there was no evidence of criminal or even civil liability regarding those who had come back from the dead. The duty of the investigators in this instance was to enforce a sort of protocol on each re-appeared body to assure the public that the federal government was aware of these individuals and they were taking the measure of it daily. It all needed to be done with a light touch, oblivious of the discovery of any root cause. It was none of their business about the root cause.

Smart observers of this phenomenon had already declared this to be so. D.J. Trump himself had all but declared that he was prepared to launch a parallel investigation into the FBI's conduct in advance of any conclusions having been reached. Public opinion was swinging against them. Absent of a true criminal conspiracy, public opinion was all that counted for the Bureau, which was in over its head and out of its element in the investigation. They all wanted it to be over, but nobody saw any sort of non-magical endpoint occurring soon. New reports, most of them false, were being fielded at Quantico daily. Merely the FBI saw their collective duty to preserve their organization for another generation. Those in power didn't honestly have any overarching theories about what was happening. They couldn't be bothered solving the case that they were merely trying to survive.

In the case of Fred Wise, they needed to ascertain an official cause of death. Which given the lack of cooperation from his survivors was proving more difficult than might have been assumed.

"Exposure to Agent Orange is a thought. Over time this chemical causes a variety of cancers," a state trooper named Viv Harwood told Mike Kay well after sunset when Temple's city limits were forded. The highway up here from Detroit was a two-lane

utility road occluded by traffic flowing to this small town on Saginaw Bay. This was since news of Fred Wise's inglorious return had made itself known.

According to Corporal Harwood (who was not a real state trooper but a private dick who had come by an old state policeman's uniform via eBay and figured he would ride the ruse as long as possible until they busted him for it), Agent Orange-related death was the most obvious cause of Wise's expiration. It was rampant among Vietnam-era vets. In addition, Viv had claimed to have come by a Saginaw oncologist's records from the 1990s where Wise was registered as a patient. He claimed he could see evidence of esophageal cancer on the side of Wise's throat even now as a series of asymmetrical ridges.

Viv's reason for being here at all was to gather information about these goings-on for a confidential client.

"We need at some point to compare notes," Harwood said to Mike seeing that he was merely a civilian liaison enrolled as a PR flack and not somebody he should legitimately fear. It was Harwood's considered opinion that the FBI as a group had few notes to share in this instance. He understood them as a mere front organization obscuring a federal paralysis. He had seen them in action close-up in Michigan, trolling porn sites on public computers. They would drive up daily from the suburbs of Detroit as the local accommodations had proven too rustic for them.

The only reason for Viv Harwood to request that they share notes was to sound Mike out as to whether he saw through his disguise. If he had saw through his disguise, he would get out of town quickly as he might. He was nervous after the impotent figureheads trolling around here. They

were obviously angry and looking to take it out on anybody they could.

“I don’t believe I saw you at one of the videoconferences,” he said to Wise. This was a means of assuring him that he, an imposter, had been invited to the official videoconferences. In reality, Viv kept a low profile around Temple, assuming that a regular-issue cop could spot his disguise from a mile off. The mood amongst the rank and file was despairing. He assumed if a cop had made him for a fake, he would have been arrested quickly as he might and thrown in a jail far more constricting than the one Fred Wise had been in now. Likely some of the more unpolished members of the thin blue line would have gone to work on Harwood in the back of whatever cruiser they had isolated him in before being booked. He thought it was only natural that they should want to blow off steam in some violent way. Being on this case rendered peace officers largely impotent. In this state they would be over-eager to confront a real wrongdoer in the presence of so much ambiguity about what was right and wrong. Let alone about what was real or supernaturally conjured.

The pigs would wail on Viv then burden him with absurd charges, not the least of which would be accusing him of being the ringleader of the politico-religious cult of Sam Makamba’s imaginings. It would take weeks and thousands of dollars before Viv would be allowed to post bail. By then he would be effectively off the case, as his unnamed client would hardly tolerate a weeks-long secession of information owing to the investigator being under arrest.

Indeed, Viv only put the trooper’s uniform on around those in the investigation he deemed to be gullible. He could read Kay’s body language and tell

that he knew there was something about him that wasn't right. The uniform was ill-fitting. It was wrinkled around the pleats. This would stand as grounds for a demerit in most departments. More than any exterior flaw, there was a certain discomfort in the way he navigated around his toolbelt that would tip off a clever observer right away.

Mike Kay recognized that something was wrong with Viv, but he wasn't able to pinpoint it exactly. He was green like an unripe banana. The officer in front of him certainly had an uncertain way about him. But, then again, he wasn't here to judge the local constabulary regarding the level of competency they evinced in front of him. Like so many inexperienced investigators, Mike simply accepted the reality that was presented before him. He supposed if he thought something was up, he could note it for John Martling in his report on the Temple Return. He could record the officer's name and badge number for future reference.

Somehow, he assumed that a local small-town cop should look like this, disheveled and out of uniform. Mike thought the FBI was here because the local cops were incompetent. He thought state troopers were a type of junior varsity of law enforcement that when in trouble called the real law enforcement professionals in his county. He had no idea about how any of this worked. He was completely out of his element in this environment and Viv Harwood sensed this was so and decided to use it against him. He would ask Kay every so often if there was anything he needed from him. Once given a task he would, under the aegis of the FBI, access whatever information was available to him directly inside the little control center the Bureau had set up. Always he would be sure to steer clear of the local cops. He had gotten all his excuse

making down by then. If confronted by one of the officers, he would exploit his FBI affiliation. He would tell them to fuck off. He knew the case far better than they did. He wasn't ashamed about his presence, only nervous after being caught. Eventually he would have accessed enough data to create a report about what was going on for his anonymous client. Which would allow to him to leave Temple, Michigan a free man. He assumed any three pieces of information would suffice in this instance. Like all the other investigators wandering about, Viv assumed at-root there was nothing for anybody to investigate. The data therefore needn't point to anybody resembling a culprit. It needn't have taken the form of a report on Fred Wise's DNA, for example. Or even the official interpretation of the Hebrew letter on the side of the man's neck that had fascinated the national media so much once they had gotten wind that it was imprinted somewhere on all the Returnees.

Viv Harwood had his own theory about the Hebrew lettering. He thought they formed one of the unspeakable names of God so often alluded to by the cabalists of the Middle Ages.

"Look, I don't know anything about it, unlike you," he said to Mike Kay doing his best to maintain eye contact with the young man. He knew this trick well enough. He knew that once eye contact was made even people who were loath to talk to you would go to extremes not to break eye contact, if only to be polite. He was trying to probe Mike Kay's depth of knowledge by trying to get him to admit that the FBI had a theory about the Returnees' designation. Couldn't have been something premeditated, Harwood thought. As the letters were not rendered in ink but were rather the product of subcutaneous disfigurements whose dark bruises had formed into this Aleph-Bet pattern over a series

of days. It might have been premeditated. But, if so, this was a nifty trick. Viv thought the Grand Rabbi of Israel had been consulted by the Feds and a real answer polled for. Whether a real answer was provided was another matter entirely. But he assumed the answer had something to do with man's eternal wickedness. The Abrahamic God seldom communicated to his creations positively. He was an unenlightened manager.

He had hoped Mike would take the bait and tell him all about it. But when he didn't, Viv simply pointed the way to the jail where Fred Wise was being kept and moved out of the way. By then, officers both federal and local were gathering in the nearby atrium. Viv grew nervous. He had the shakes constantly nowadays. Mere alcohol couldn't seem to still them. He was fearful of being ratted out. Enough so that he felt it had already occurred. He didn't know why they kept coming at him like this. When nobody up here had confronted him with anything more than a dirty look. This was entirely because of the rumpled nature of his trooper's uniform.

Over the next few days, Viv would steady his nerves enough so that when he was found out, the arresting officer, agent Sam Makamba, would comment to his colleagues what a smooth operator he was. He was so smooth that the agent speculated his legitimate state-issued private detective ID was fraudulent and he was in fact a professional confidence man. Had to be. As Viv had no compunction at all seemingly about infiltrating police ranks for his own gain. Sam assumed it was all in a day's work for him.

Once in the jail proper, Kay could see Fred Wise's re-animated corpse in the far end of a hall bisected by iron bars. This had once been a school for youths euphemistically described as "wayward"

before one of the interminable rounds of state budget cuts in Michigan had caused disparate twines of the social safety net to fray. Up here, the bad economy acted as a pressure cooker. It caused various sectors of the economy to collide and fuse. In the bakery downtown, for example, a row of plungers still lined the wall above a rack of paczkis. Nobody up here found such discrepancies unusual. In Temple, Michigan, there hadn't been a building permit issued in seven years. Everybody was intent on making do. They thought economic decay was inevitable if they thought about the future at all. They didn't see themselves as unfortunate in any way.

Just like all the other Returnees, Fred Wise's perceived lucidity changed depending on what angle you viewed him at.

"How much sense does it make for somebody to talk to him?" Kay asked Agent Makamba who was in no better position to answer the question. The FBI advance man that they were supposed to rendezvous with had called in sick at the last minute and left them both with little reason to carry on with the interview. In that the interviewee had proven to be relentlessly closed mouth in such encounters. They would watch him for a while, talk amongst themselves, and go back outside and wander around the town square trying their best to dodge all media attempts at contact. Absent of John Martling's presence, they were all bereft of direction as to how to proceed.

Regardless, they felt the need to follow through. Agent Makamba, convinced that Wise was the ringleader of a suicide cult, had different reasons than Mike for wanting to carry on. He was laboring under the delusion that he could get Wise to talk if only enough pressure was applied. His technique for applying pressure was to glare daggers at a person

until they broke down. It never worked, but this was his technique. He assumed the reason why it hadn’t worked yet was that he hadn’t stared with enough intensity. Perhaps with Fred Wise he would succeed. He didn't have any real questions planned for him anyway. He believed that asking genuine questions of a suspect was not the way to go despite what the FBI field manual counseled.

Unlike other Returnees, Fred, once encountered, did not assault a viewer with an aura of otherworldliness. He did not seem like he was created by some malign force specifically with the intention of terrifying.

“He still got his Bronze Star on him,” Mike Kay said to Sam staring at the medal in the corner of the cell. To judge by the dirt accruing to the medal’s raised edges, he had been buried with it on. One of his handlers had wisely unpinned it from his uniform when they had committed the infested garments to the local incinerator and placed it in the cell’s corner.

There was the idea of using the medal as a memory jog to have Fred recall his identity in explicit terms (if he had not already known). Perhaps they didn’t know what to do with the medal anyway and just left it on his person. They would have confiscated it and kept it in storage like valuables for the other prisoners. But in their minds, this would have been a recognition of detainee status. They weren’t subtle like that especially with creatures they feared. So, the Bronze Star sat on the triangular metal table bolted to the concrete floor. It was the first object that drew a visitor’s eye. When facing the cell, there was nothing that one could do except to stare at it with constancy.

To judge by his facial expression at first blush, Fred Wise was neither in better nor worse shape than any of the Iowa Returnees. Fuzzy Dice had

risen over a year ago. Trump was almost president, and the dead were still rising. Impartial observers were looking for signs of progress.

“I think he has a little bit more on the ball compared to the others,” Kay said to Makamba of Fred Wise after spending fifteen minutes with him. Throughout that time the Returnee’s gaze had been attempted to be captured by Mike repeatedly. This was like catching a housefly with bare hands. Though Wise was impossible to engage in any way, Mike Kay, nevertheless, detected a type of awareness there. Fred seemed to know where he was if only to judge by the baleful look that he had given Mike. He seemed to realize it would do no good to protest his confinement by means of gripping the iron bars and shaking them. He had an obvious concept of what it meant to be a prisoner. Which meant he had an obvious concept of what it meant to be free.

He wasn’t some sort of animal in a cage who viewed his confinement as some sort of celestial accident, devoid of malicious intent. If only instinctively, he knew the people on the other side of the bars meant him harm. He had thought enough about his situation apparently to realize every prisoner should have as little emotional contact with his captor as possible. He had no intention of recognizing another’s humanity even as they were denying his. Maybe he thought such things. There was a canniness to Fred Wise’s silence that the other Returnees lacked. He seemed to be waiting for an opportune moment to engage the enemy on his own terms.

This behavior was feeding into Sam Makamba’s suspicion that he was the kingpin of the fake Lazaruses, simply playing possum for them prior to initiating his devious plan.

“We know all that you’re doing and have confessions at the ready,” Sam said to Mr. Wise who had lately broken into that familiar guttural tongue of the resurrected. A lot of C’s and O’s existed in this soft utterance. There was one word “cukot” repeated constantly. It might have been identified as a lullaby in an unfamiliar language if witnessed in a private carriage of a train. Weeks ago, Mike Kay had concluded these utterances meant nothing at all, despite FBI linguists’ attestations to the contrary. He assumed the language was a mere clearing of a throat initiated by a malfunctioning brain. Maybe here was a mere protolanguage, attempting to mean something but failing. He had no intention of recording the speech on his phone as Martling had instructed him to do. He thought this attempt at decoding was one more dead end in a road system where there was nothing but dead ends.

Mike Kay thought that agent Makamba was the one requiring close evaluation, not Fred Wise.

To those just awoken maybe we’re the ones in need of putting down.

This was the wisp of a thought that floated by the window of Mike’s consciousness before disappearing for good. Maybe the Returnees experienced the rest of the world as the rest of the world experienced them: like objects of an on-going nightmare that refused to abate regardless of how much one struggled to emerge from its grip. In their experience they were utterly normal creatures simply looking to adapt to a deeply strange world. Either that or they were ambulatory vegetables devoid of experience altogether. They couldn’t or wouldn’t communicate to confirm which it was. Eventually such recalcitrance would doom them, Mike realized, as obstinacy proved deeply unnerving to many humans. So much so that some people

were prepared to forsake any iota of civilized conduct to end the silence. If you wanted to get under a man's skin, what you did was stare at him silently for minutes with a wan smile on your face. After less than ten minutes of such treatment, even Gandaji would wrap his bony fingers around your throat. It just wasn't socially acceptable behavior. It was usually attempted to provoke a violent response. Better to come up to a man and spit in his face then stare at him dully for a few minutes. It was strange that this was the case, but it was.

It certainly was the case with Fred Wise. The only difference with him being was that he rarely stared at people, aiming his gaze to the left and right of them alternately to inspect an imaginary figurine in detail.

"We're done here," Sam Makamba said to Mike Kay once having reached his boiling point. He walked down the hall to the guarded door without a glance back. It might be supposed that he had expected Mike to follow in his wake meekly. But for minutes after the door clanged shut Kay sat quietly in the plastic chair that they had given him, silently observing everything that Wise was in the midst of performing, all the gestures and the bursts of the aforementioned lullaby rendered in that private language of theirs and the odd fragment of a jingle for a feminine plumbing product that seemed to have no referent in the real world. He stared at Fred out of curiosity. For once removed from Makamba's overbearing presence, he assumed something previously unnoticed would be noticed if only by him. It would be something to go on if only to justify the expense of the trip out here. Jameson by this point had arrived at Mike's Iowa townhouse with the boxes bought at the local U-Haul. He was in the process of taping them together.

Mike was unaware of this but still bothered by his absence from home. He sought that which might remind him of home. The bit of masking tape, for example, on the back of the Bronze Star was the same rose-pink-colored specialty variety that he and Jameson had bought as an in joke concerning their relationship. To judge by its tattered condition, likely it had been placed there by Fred Wise himself decades ago to guard against being pricked by an unsecured pin. It was no more than a one inch by half inch strip really. An address was written on its interior. And except for the swishy color, it might have passed unnoticed by the likes of Mike Kay himself:

Easton's Bunnies: Pets and Meat
325 Old 49, Templ...

On the way out, Mike encountered Viv Harwood once more. Viv was in the midst of entering pornographic doodles into a fake ticket notepad.

"What was this town like thirty years ago, you think?" he asked Harwood somehow assuming he might know. "What's missing now as opposed to back then? And vice-versa?"

There was a low rumbling emanate from somewhere. This distraction gave Kay the opportunity to look at the ticket pad.

"Chimera, a mythical beast," Viv said to Mike and held up the doodle. This was a limp monstrous prick leaking its contents into a fallow field. Next time, Viv thought, he wouldn't have gotten so drunk before he drove up here. But he looked at the address and gave Mike directions regardless. Well, he supposed he could talk his way out of it. With him really it wouldn't be so much of a struggle.

Chapter Four: The Prayer Spoken in Distress

I.

On the day of President Trump’s inauguration, January 21, 2017, the returned dead of the Midwest, now sixty-three members, broke into a common and synchronous chant replete with words both ominous and profound:

הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי אֱלֹהִים-- כִּי בָאוּ מַיִם עַד-נָפֶשׁ.
ג טָבַעְתִּי, בִּיוֵן מְצוּלָה-- וְאֵין מָעֳמָד;
בָּאתִי בְמַעֲמַקֵּי-מַיִם, וְשִׁבֹּלֶת שְׁטָפָתְנִי.

ד יָגַעְתִּי בְקָרְאִי, נִחַר גְּרוֹנִי: כָּלוּ עֵינַי--מְיַחֵל, לֵאלֹהָי.

“It’s a Bible psalm, number 69, according to the King James version,” FBI Deputy Director John Martling reported to all assembled at an early morning White House meeting a month later. The oak-paneled conference room they were in lacked a proper name. It was somewhere off the Oval Office in the same wing. John was surprised that it hadn’t been called something. The Oak Room perhaps. He was surprised there hadn’t been an official White

House photographer present as he assumed was standard in all high-level meetings.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, Director Martling (which was what he wanted to be called nowadays, hang the *Deputy*) fumbled around for his reading glasses.

"*Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul*," he read from the post-it notes he had carried around with him during meetings. "*I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God*."

The rest of the prayer was scrawled in tiny lettering on the back of the email printout that was required to gain access to this part of the White House. Martling paused before continuing.

"It's another hundred twenty lines," he finally said, looking directly at the president's orange pate, "of which hard copies are readily available if required."

Donald J Trump, when seen from a certain angle, had an atavistic look to him. It put one in mind (at least from the neck up) of a man-beaver hybrid. Such a creature was now lost to science somewhere down the tree of life from the homo sapiens twig. It was hard being a man-beaver hybrid, likely. In that the front teeth had many purposes apart from mastication.

"The question I have for you," the president said to John, "well for you, for all concerned. Is what does any of this have to do with the price of tea in China?"

In the James Bond movies, John recalled, in the old school Sean Connery variety, oak-paneled rooms like this came replete with trap doors into which unsatisfactory subordinates like Martling could be tossed on a whim.

“We’re gathering information as we speak,” he told President Trump, not necessarily untruthfully. “We have a general theory. We have definite ideas of what we should do about it.”

In the Bond movies, the door would open to a shaft which would lead to a working incinerator whose chthonian heat would strip flesh from bone in a minute.

“I think we need to prepare for the worst,” John said to the president. “Most of the people we have on the case take it as a bad sign.”

As to how bad a sign, there was a bit of a disconnect between the theologians and scientists.

“Some say the end is near, some say further tests are needed,” he said neatly enough once the grumbling in the room had calmed down. Probably it had been an ill-advised move politically to just blurt it out like that, presenting the unvarnished truth in a sentence. In rooms like this, the unvarnished truth rarely made an appearance. Their inhabitants were almost without fail masters of the smart move. From a psychopath’s perspective, it was always better to lie than tell the truth. If only because the truth was a bird that, once released, flew anywhere it might. It could only be revealed to the light of day once. Whereas lies could be strung together forever like pearls. Lies were faithful servants of their creator. Also, nobody had a monopoly on the truth. The truth was a slut that took a billion lovers. And really was better off being locked away in some fetid backwoods brothel to be abused by a boyfriend/pimp.

The wisest of the Bond supervillains, Martling thought, would necessarily want to keep the temperature on the incinerator low to prolong the torture. As torture was the goal of every circumspect supervillain, not murder. Murder was a releasing of a victim from life and, therefore, a

blessing. Whereas torture was a craft prized only by the vilest of men. Such men were sadists without souls. They were the personification of evil. They made others suffer to extract a rarified pleasure from the sight. If you asked them how come, they couldn't explain the predilection to you.

"It's the prayer itself, not so much that they had uttered it, causing concern," John said. He wished in a very dull way he had provided this information first.

"Another name for Psalm 69, realize, is the *Prayer to be Uttered in Distress*."

He said this to President Trump in particular. The famous scowl of the president/celebrity tie salesman had lately returned to his orange visage. He seemed in no better mood than anybody else in the Great Nameless Room just then. Those assembled wanted answers leading to solutions. That was why they were here. The last fucking thing in the world they wanted was to get on their knees and beg God's forgiveness. Not for fucking anything would they denigrate themselves so. No, they had done nothing to be forgiven for, generally. Donald Trump, in particular, was an altruistic soul. Just ask him. He didn't need the fucking money. No, he was not taking a salary for this position. He wiped his ass with thousand-dollar bills and gave them to the bathroom attendants afterwards at his resorts to do as they wanted with them. For Christmas he gave 'em Trump-logo ties. Alternately, a picture of himself with *Best Wishes* robo-signed on the lower right corner.

Martling thought: You didn't want somebody being fricasseed in two minutes when two hours would have been the right prescription. At least for a Bond supervillain. They were supposed to be geniuses, these villains. But they were dumb as a box of rocks on this point. He wondered then if this

plot deficiency was present in any of Ian Fleming's novels. He had never read a word of them himself. He assumed there was no reason to do so once they had been converted to film. All the books he had in his Arlington home belonged to his ex-wife, Nancy. John read the Washington papers mostly for the sports. You asked him for his favorite author he would tell you Thomas Boswell of *The Washington Post*.

Donald Trump's face was capable of changing colors quickly as the cuttlefish. It had done so three times before he next spoke.

"Shit for brains," he said to John Martling. "If we all wanted a Sunday school lesson, we'd bring in the pope and ask for a benediction. But the pope's as scared shitless by it as we are. He's holed up somewhere nice, I guess. Someplace with a little warmth. I have it on good authority he's hitting up Elon Musk to be on the first rocket to Mars. He wants to open a mission there. The Holy Father. He wants to convert the rocks up there before the Muslims have a chance to do likewise. He wants to say a little prayer and do a little dance. It's beautiful, really is. Let's just hope that with him it's a one-way trip!"

Nobody in the room knew how to take this. As with so much of what Trump said, it was one-part Borscht Belt schtick and one-part outer borough palaver. On this occasion those assembled simply ignored the utterance. They fundamentally still didn't believe in the reality of a Trump presidency. They were waiting to wake up from either the bemusing dream or full-blown nightmare they were in the midst of (depending on their political affiliation). In the manner of dreamers, they were slow to react to the visions set before them. And this upset the forty-fifth president to no end.

The President of the United States of America had just commented that John Martling had shit for brains. For some reason, John didn't take offense. In that he doubted somehow that it had actually been said. Or if it had been said he doubted for some reason Trump had been talking about him. If he said it again maybe John would grow confrontational about it. Look, he had been put in an extremely difficult situation. His lack of results needed to be filtered through the reality that here was a situation even Jesus Christ might have a difficult time putting a stop to if he had been inclined to do so.

The Christian theologians on the FBI payroll were telling John that he had maybe three more weeks to play with before the Seventh Seal on the Book of Life was opened and the shit started flying in earnest. (The Jews on the payroll were not so sure. And the one imam who had agreed to participate had lately clammed up about such matters as he had not been given a dedicated prayer room all his own.)

"As far as we can tell," Martling told the president, "there's no imminent catastrophe about to take place on our sovereign territory. The Yellowstone caldera is normal according to the geologists from the Park Service. There's renewed volcanic activity in one of Iceland's volcanos, but that's not an existential threat to the United States," he said. "Solar activity is normal and the Canary Island landslide scenario, so I've been assured, has always been unlikely if not impossible," John said showing off his eschatological knowledge. "There much more stolidity in the formation than was previously known," he said. "And, even if it happened, we'd surely have days of notice before an evacuation was required for the East coast."

Tornadoes could touch down in the heartland and hurricanes hatchet at the southeast all they

may, Martling said. But these were not, let's be frank, Biblical events.

Even the Jesus freaks stashed in Quantico at taxpayer's expense had discounted Hurricane Katrina as God-ordained. They were not that cruel or maniacal. Even the most devout among them believed in science to a degree.

The killer meteorite theory had always been a popular meme within the media ever since Returnee Number Five had been verified. The president asked Martling about this passingly.

"They've indexed every rock out there with an intersection of earth's orbit," he said of the consultant scientist. "And we have nothing to worry about for at least six hundred years."

Far from alleviating the tension in the room, however, the unknown quality of the imminent Apocalypse that John believed was in the offing only increased anxiety. Maybe a giant hand would on a single Sunday morning appear from nowhere and smite Americans where they stood. It seemed that the mystery of God's wrath was part of the punishment. As Martling had noted, it's torture not death that was true evil's métier. And obviously subsequent events suggested the Good Lord was off his rocker utterly.

"We need to figure all this out before rushing in, OK," Trump said. He stared at an abstract point three feet in front of him. "We need to make a plan and stick to the plan, rain or shine," he said. "You don't win at anything changing game plans at halftime."

Immediately after, Trump felt the ghost of some sort of primordial slug slide then die then vanish inside his throat. He coughed then asked the vice-president, Mike Pence, what point exactly he thought the president was trying to make. Because of lack of sleep and his advancing years, the

president had to be reminded of exactly what constantly. This was not the way his first term was supposed to go. The zombie patrol that he was heading up seemed without end. And the Mexican wall was languishing.

He thought if he ignored the whole situation it would go away over time. No dice, thanks to the *New York Times* and their elitist ilk. This had all happened on their (which was to say Obama's) watch. But you would never in a million years read that anywhere within the Gray Lady's folds. The writers in their employ had a pronounced ahistorical perspective on this event. It was as if BHO had not been in charge of anything over the past eight years.

In addition to media unfairness, Trump's lead investigator from the FBI, Director Martling, had not been exactly covering himself in glory at this briefing thus far.

"Have another piece of gum," the president said to John after several minutes pause when various backchat from unimportant briefing attendees had mercifully interrupted the information flow temporarily. All throughout his time here, Martling could be observed alternately filling his mouth with four sticks of Doublemint then removing the wad from his mouth when it came time to talk. From experience with his brother Freddie, the president knew damn well this was a sign of a lush trying to disguise the alcohol on his breath. And it was not yet eleven in the morning! He thought it was a disgrace actually and grounds for removing this man from the case immediately. On the other hand (and this had been pointed out to the president in higher-level meetings than this), the criminal investigation was a mere sham absent of a metaphysical investigation girding it. The Director was a mere caretaker, therefore, and not in any

position of power at all. His boss, James Comey, had said as much to the president in his administration's first briefing just hours after he had taken the solemn oath. Might as well let him trudge on for another few months absent a real change of direction by this administration. Eventually the president would need to give an address to the nation admitting that they had no clue with what they were dealing. He would relay the good news about the Yellowstone caldera and the non-intersecting meteors first. That's how you broke bad news to somebody in Washington: by relaying whatever little bit of good news existed first. *The good news is surgery on your tumor is not required...because it's inoperable and metastatic*.

Like any good filmic leader, the president would cap this briefing by demanding hard options from all parties concerned.

"Donald, don't say prayer is ineffectual, that it's akin to giving up. Because it's exactly the opposite," vice-president Pence, who was an evangelical, told the president anticipating his objections in advance. "You pray precisely because your heart is full of hope, uplifted by belief," he said. "So here is a time perhaps where all of us are called to stand tall by kneeling. It's a humble, humbling act," he said of prayer. "But in my judgment in this case it is a necessary act. It might well be the only positive action available to us. Not all prayers are answered, of course," he said. "But that doesn't mean our words fall on deaf ears. Ever. And, Donald, I believe you as the commander-in-chief are obliged at this moment to lead us. You can do it in the Oval Office, on national television. At the center of the national seal. You'll bow your head and ask God for national forgiveness. So much wickedness has been committed in the name of reproductive freedom that it's a wonder the ocean hasn't risen-up already

and taken us all down to its bottom. I mean, decades ago. The legalization of infant murder, I am afraid, is an offense that in God's eyes requires an extreme expiation. And you would be blind, Donald, not to see the Lord's hand in this miracle, zombie apocalypse, whatever you care to call it. For what other sort of rational explanation is there to turn to finally? Has any scientist, I'm saying of the no doubt thousands of scientists thus far consulted over the past year of our national ordeal, offered even a half-convincing argument to the contrary? No secularized person can offer a complete explanation as to why what's happening is happening. Likely because the explanation lies beyond the secular realm. You kneel and pray and seek out Christ's wisdom in your heart and then all of this is made clear to you. Mr. President, it's no great mystery. Once the simple notion of man's own finitude has been entertained and accepted everything becomes clear. So, in a way we are all dancing around the obvious. Or at any rate what appears to be obvious at the moment," Pence, who despite all his religious fervor was hedging his bets, said to the new president.

The vice-president cleared his throat before continuing.

"And so here is a strategy that at the very least must be entertained. You call it a National Day of Prayer. With the caveat that each person should look into their heart before deciding to pray. No, we are not transforming into a theocracy though this is the drift our liberal friends will accuse us of once we move forward. But I say again: let all those with a better idea speak now. Others have suspicions, not solutions. Whereas we offer release from damnation in the most self-abnegating way imaginable."

Closing his eyes President Trump briefly imagined the scene Pence just described. He (and

perhaps Melania?) was kneeling on the royal blue carpet of the Oval Office over which so many political titans formerly strode (and a dog or two [*ed. and maybe Henry Kissinger*] had defecated on).

"It makes me sick to have to contemplate such a thing," he said to Pence with all honesty and was as usual ignored. As with all men given to bloviation, Trump's first two or three sentences usually were ignored, taken as a mere clearing of the throat prefatory to actual expression. Over time he had learned to use this effect to his advantage, especially in negotiations. He would state his position immediately in as few words as possible and constantly refer to his former statement to the confusion of his adversary. People were always underestimating his capacity to get to the point. But in matters of the heart, he usually said what he felt. His wife and kids could pick up on a particular tone of voice that would instruct them to listen. Nobody else knew this attribute. They figured the first things he always said were bullshit that only saps or the ever-conniving media would attune to.

No, he was not a religious man certainly. And this was an understatement.

"There's no negotiating with God," Trump said with a misplaced wistful tone that belied his supreme revulsion at entering a dialog with something that never negotiated. To him such an attribute was synonymous with depravity. As even predatory spiders were inclined to negotiate with the flies they had trapped. He thought this intransigence couldn't be permitted. He thought nothing could be so cold-hearted as to not render a counteroffer once a good faith offer was made.

To Mike Pence, an exhortation to pray sounded like piety. He tried to fan its small flame into something resembling genuine religious devotion.

“Think of the accolades you’ll receive,” he told his boss concerning his triumph in forestalling God’s Judgment upon America. According to Pence, this would invariably cause the American people to repeal the twenty-second amendment and make Trump president for life. It was nothing the president set out to do. But the effects of the humble act of prayer would invariably be spectacular and supremely beneficial to the Man with a Plan (Trump, that is, not Jesus Christ). He would be the New Savior of the World, second only to the Old Savior of the World, in the estimation of the Saved. “Jesus Christ’s right-hand man,” was how Pence put it to all concerned. He made it clear he was only offering suggestions rather than making demands. He believed men should come to Jesus on their own. He had no cynical motive to promoting a spiritual solution. Even though, he was quick to admit, somebody else might soon enough.

Now I know why so many people hate politicians, the president thought holding his right hand in front of his mouth. *Don’t trust ‘em even a little*, he thought staring at Pence’s snowy mane. In the dull light of this unnamed room, it seemed to glow, possessed of an internal luminescence. Pols make their bullshit up as they go along and there’s nothing sacred with them. *They’re not normal people, fundamentally*, Trump thought then lingered over the conceit as if it was some great revelation. And then he thought: *but here I am amongst them*. He made up his mind to do something bold. As usual, he didn’t dwell on the repercussions of his actions. He felt the need to act quickly and would repair the damage incurred at some future point.

“The key is to normalize the whole thing,” Trump said, “to make it seem like nothing out of the usual is happening when somebody crawls through the ground and kicks open the casket they were

buried in. It's a type of rebranding operation where you take something old and scary and make it seem that it is on the cutting edge of the culture. Like Bea Arthur on *The Golden Girls* maybe. At which point people will start to forget about it. As they generally will have the tendency to ignore something that they are being sold so aggressively. Believe me, I know from experience. It's a strategy of hiding in plain sight. Which is a strategy the car industry once pulled when there were all these horrible auto accidents caused by unsafe cars. Detroit never put a single safety device in their cars that Washington had not mandated they put in there first," Trump said. "You would see these ads for cars without seat belts in them and the hard plastic steering wheel eggs that would go straight through your eye at even a twenty mile an hour crash. The point being that past a certain point everybody realized that American cars were dangerous. So, there was no need for them to cover anything up. The car that James Dean died in, a Porsche I believe, had sales go through the roof when he died in it. There was nothing for the company to hide, nothing to be ashamed about. By then, the world had been conditioned to the reality that cars were dangerous objects. It was sexy to the young, the danger. And up until the 1960s, the government was off the hook about the need to do anything about it."

He was wondering after the marketing campaign's mechanics. You get some noteworthy compliant celebs, the president thought, and show 'em clowning around with these Returnees, maybe like in a staged flag football game. It's all smiles and quick-cutting and Katrina and the Waves singing "Walking on Sunshine" up to the point that people reach for the remote involuntarily. And it will only be then that the crisis would be over. When the truth ceases to pull in the big numbers like it had before,

Trump could consider case closed. He didn't consider anything but his popularity. He realized the object in American life was to win. He realized a politician was just a common whore who had been handed the reins of power.

In the president's mind, this crisis was a crisis of marketing. It required a serious business pro like him to resolve it, independent of any sort of religious mumbo-jumbo.

"Who here has overseen the creation of a multi-billion-dollar company?" President Trump facetiously asked all those assembled. Seconds later, John Martling had been tempted to raise his hand just to get it over with and be shit-canned on the spot. He had a slight suspicion the world was ending. He wanted to suck the remainder of joy out of life while he still had the chance. More than anything he wanted to be absolved of the need to be responsible for the government's handling of this affair. Surprisingly, all the dissembling and the bullshitting that the case demanded was proving psychologically taxing for him. Before it started, he would have thought he could take it all in stride. Objective reality was like an aged dog whose true value was only judged at the moment of its death. Martling had considered himself a tough guy before the case started but had proven himself soft. Now he wanted merely to be put out of his misery.

Such massaging of public opinion was a too obvious ploy for the almost hysterically hostile media to buy into. So, this was why President Trump declared the entire program must be secretive and conducted through the proxies of various public-minded private citizens who could be plied with promises of special favors at some future point.

"In the end we do what we can and what will be will be," Trump surmised as the meeting ended. He was in fact harboring the same deep-seated dread

that others shared concerning those who had Returned. The explanation-making machinery of Science and the Law had jammed badly when attempting to process the mystery of the Returnees. Now it was either abandon modernity to the wolves (as per the vice-president's wishes), or try an end run past both modernity and history by attempting to ignore the whole goddamn thing. Could be God's bare foot was due to descend from the heavens at any moment to squash us all like in the Monty Python opening credits. But if that was the case, all action was likely futile regardless. DJ Trump wouldn't pray and swear his undying gratitude to some hideous monster who had kept the world on tenterhooks all these many months. This was to his considerable credit. If called before St. Peter to explain his impiety, soon enough Trump would, as standard, try to negotiate. Look, there was never an excuse to compromise one's values especially when it seemed like the only smart play. Independent of the president, folks were praying for the soul of the nation. Trump figured there was still time for that nonsense anyway. He had assumed there was supposed to be some sort of climactic battle at Armageddon just before the end. Until that happened, he figured he had wiggle room to attempt a rebranding of America's sin.

Nobody seemed especially satisfied with his plan afterwards.

As they milled about outside in the carpeted hallway after adjournment (as was the custom for some reason after such rarified briefings), the president cornered John Martling.

"In three sentences or less," he told him, "tell me what you would do. Three sentences. And by what you would do, I mean not what is your heart's desire (which we both know begins and end with getting drunk). I'm asking for your opinion. That's

all. Because it seems you're all I got. I'm asking as one fellow New Yorker to the other."

In an almost easeful but involuntary way, John Martling, who was actually very bright underneath the bottle's foggy accretions, stated his point of view. Which was that things were not as bad as the experts indicated they were.

Trump was actually amazed that he said this. He told him this using the requisite curse words that the occasion called for.

"You care to elaborate, rummy," he said to John. "Even a little?"

When he talked about the end of the world and all the rest of it, John said, he was simply quoting his raft of "experts" as seemed to be the protocol in high-level meetings like this one.

"You don't want to push all your chips in on the first hand," he said to the president talking to him like just another guy on the barstool.

John loosened the knot on his tie before continuing.

"So what you do is to refrain from offering your own point of view at least straight off. You offer instead the point of view of others. Some of whom you realize are completely unqualified to offer an opinion. They're experts in name only, these experts. They're opinions for hire. So, if and when the shit hits the fan you have somebody other than yourself to blame. That's the purpose of an expert. To protect those in power from ever having to decide."

Expert-wrangling was a political survival tactic wherein administrative competency was the only casualty. That is, if you disregarded the nameless underlings whose reputation had been unfairly smeared by this tactic. Nobody cared what you knew in Washington, they only cared if you were able to fake it convincingly enough to pass media

scrutiny. It was only in a genuine crisis where such fake rationalism was called into question. And presently it was Martling's expressed opinion that they were not yet in crisis mode.

After correcting Trump about his preferred drink (gin mixed in a variety of cocktails rather than the demon rum), John continued.

"People, whenever they are faced with a real mystery, inevitably jump to dark conclusions," he said to President Trump. "They assume the worst and are happy about being proven wrong. The fact of the matter is we don't know really the first thing about the dead rising, about what's happening. And none of the Returnees or however you want to refer to them can tell us either. But they seem to be snapping out of it by degrees," he said. "One or two of them can now communicate simple thoughts already in an assisted way. The fact that they're getting slightly better should probably be seen as a positive. They're evolving into something more normal and you have to ask yourself why," John said to the president.

Likely this whole thing was a random occurrence, he said. It would end as it began. After which they'll be no explanations about how or why. The historians will study it and then it'll be a remnant of history. Nobody cared about such matters actually: who did what to whom and why. History's boring to people, the Battle of Gettysburg and all that. The Great Rising in the Midwest would be studied and memorialized then largely forgotten. Nobody would dream about it any longer. Nobody would think God had a hand in it any more than they would think He had a hand at Gettysburg.

Trump told Martling he was saying such things now only to balance out the dour assessment he had provided in the meeting.

“Maybe, maybe not,” John said to Trump when asked by him if he should even prepare for the 2020 election. His point was that it was far too early to say what trajectory the crisis was taking. But the Returnees as a group struck him not so much as celestial heralds foretelling the End of Days so much as a group of relatively decayed welfare recipients milling around a social services building in the morning before it opened to be first in line for benefits. They were pathetic, not frightening. They had all died either by suicide or some extended bout of bacchanalia that functioned as virtual suicide. Having your heart burst in your chest at age thirty-two from a twenty rock a day meth habit was not, strictly speaking, an accidental death. Life’s losers were generally not conjured as worthy subjects for a lead role in the Apocalypse (though the Lord worked in…*blah, blah, blah*). Why not bring back God’s Greatest Servant, Anita Bryant, to put the fags of America on notice that their moment of reckoning was nigh? This was simple common sense as far as Deputy Director Martling was concerned. President Trump agreed. “It’s always about branding, even heaven,” 45 remarked to John who was in no position to disagree. “Look, who would fear a God that doesn’t know the first thing about presenting Himself? He’s making Himself look foolish even as He’s trying to drum up support. Which makes you think He doesn’t have all that much going on upstairs to begin with. You could be born lucky but still be an imbecile. People don’t respect you automatically. You need to show them you’re a winner constantly.”

It all had the feel, if only to John, as some random natural occurrence.

“You flip a coin and it’s usually heads or tails,” was how he put it to Trump. “But once every billion flips it lands on its side. It doesn’t mean that the

world is coming to an end because it lands on its side every now and again. It's a bit of weirdness simply that you duly note and forget about. You can't force the universe to mean something that it doesn't want to mean," he said. "You can't look at any of these losers for any length of time and decide there's a master plan at work here. You spend some time with them and you see what I mean. This is a punishment for them, not a blessing. It simply wouldn't work this way when the real end comes about. You'd assume everybody would agree what's happening."

As for the spontaneous chanting of the prayer spoken in distress, this might have been less of a warning then some vestigial bit of weirdness rendered for no effect at all.

"Why don't they just tell us already what they're expecting from us absent the signs and symbols?" Martling asked Trump briefly staring past him into the Oval Office. It had an oval shape, he noticed, which was a rare instance of truth in advertising in DC. He assumed such truth-telling had been completely accidental. That a hexagonal structure should have been dubbed an oval in order to merely obfuscate would have been par for the course in this town. Here, they lied as a matter of course. Lying was a way of preserving personal power. It created secret knowledge no matter how inane. Thus, the liar made himself an insider by simply constructing walls between the knowledge holder and those ignorant of the truth. The Washington liar was always increasing his insularity while those in "fly over country" were stripped of power because of their being dispossessed of the truth. Only the true secret of the dead, of the great and decaying Midwest, had proved elusive to these hacks. Washington liars were in a tizzy over this circumstance understandably. The control of current

events had slipped through their grasp at least temporarily.

John thought they were all the butt of some massive joke. Perhaps the joke was man-made and perhaps it was celestial. If it was celestial in origin, the only logical course would be to preserve personal dignity for as long as it took for the joke to end. The guilty could eventually be identified later and destroyed.

"It has the feel of a joke, like somebody's putting out breadcrumbs to form a trail that leads to nothing you would ever want to see," John said, unintentionally describing a few of the more off-putting ad jingles for the president. Lot of reusable enema bags for some reason were on full display in the imaginations of the Returnees. It was hardly a product that seemed primed to sell itself. Which might have been why perhaps so many jingles had been created in service to its marketing effort:

Just open up/pull the tab/it goes right in/
Little water's all it takes/
To clean the mess within...

Various social histories would look back on the government's efforts as evidence of panic in the face of futility.

"You as president can ask yourself what can be done," John said to Mr. Trump. "Really, I think our efforts should be directed at forestalling a panic as opposed to making a bad situation worse," he said. "Because if it turned out we couldn't, didn't have the resources, I'm saying, to do anything about this situation, it's probably no great loss to the world. Better to spend resources elsewhere knowing nothing could be done about it anyway. And if it turns out like I'm guessing, it'll all die down before long. Then you can take credit for it after the fact.

The Democrats are completely out of their element here, sir. Because of the religious undertones of this thing, they can't gain a foothold. They're calling for the EPA to do tests daily, as if there's some sort of known toxin that revives corpses. So, if it works out for the best for all parties concerned, it's you who's in a position to get the credit solely. And just between you and me, Mr. President, these Jesus Freaks give me the willies big time, too. I wouldn't if I were you do what Mr. Pence is urging," John said. "You can tell God to go fuck Himself for the both of us next time you see Him. Doubt it awfully if He'd have anything nice to say about either of us, too."

For a few seconds President Trump stood still as if his mind was a damp sponge and the advice already poured onto it required some time to penetrate.

"You're all I got for an expert anyway," Trump said to Martling, tacitly admitting that he was out of ideas. He figured his rebranding of the dead could move forward, parallel to the de-criminalizing of resurrection that John was suggesting. Hopefully within a few weeks there would be a candidate for reformation that they could parade on TV to show that things were getting back to normal. They would dress him up in a suit and cover up all the holes in his flesh with mascara. They could have him shake the president's hand and mouth some proximation of how it was great to be alive. End of story at that point. Completely. Trump could put Ivanka in charge of this effort. She was without portfolio at the moment and eager after something to sink her teeth into.

So relieved had the president been at the results of this informal one-on-one, the president made the mistake of inviting Director Martling to an official state dinner tomorrow.

“Well,” Trump said to him putting an arm on his shoulder, “you will come around with all your war stories about Iowa. People on the outside of this thing are eager to know all about it. They like war stories. They want to know what one of these monster’s first words were and what they smelled like coming out of the ground. They’re afraid yet fascinated. They want to hear it from you second hand. You say it with a smile on your face and then they’ll be satisfied that everything’s gonna be fine. Just as you say.”

When John finally arrived at the dinner, stag needless to say, he would be three sheets to the wind and staring down the front of the dress of the wife of whatever soulless European technocrat the State Department had deigned be wined and dined by the POTUS at taxpayer’s expense. “If you want to know what confronting a zombie is like, bitch,” Martling would say to this woman when asked, “stare in the motherfucking mirror for thirty seconds.” And then he would vomit on her Manolo Blahniks for half the time it had taken to get the words out.

All in a day’s work for Mr. John Martling. But in the wake of this display, even world-famous vulgarian Donald Trump would be taken aback. He would suspend John without pay for two weeks. Of course, life was hard for some men and you gave them the benefit of the doubt regarding the manner that they tried to ease their way through it. But by this point Martling had been, if only through his association with the president, promoted as the public face of the government investigation of the Midwest Resurrections. His impropriety would make the papers (not that Trump cared so much what they had to say). At the very least it would shake, however slightly, a nervous public’s confidence in the way this situation was being handled.

It was a free country, more or less. Constantly on the twenty-four news networks, various media-appointed “experts” had been for months on end offering testimony about the cause of the resurrections. Either secular or religious-based, these explanations usually involved a disaster of eschatological proportions. Had to be. If only because the “experts” had never seen anything like it before. These intellectual whores would always end their testimony with the injunction that the public remain calm, but their words conveyed panic. Something terrible had happened from which we had little ability to recover. Drawn from disparate backgrounds, they all, nevertheless, felt this point had to be made. *Stay calm*. There was never any story with a happy ending that began with the reanimation of a corpse. This included the ones in the Bible. Resurrection was obviously against the universal order. And once the dead rose, all bets were off about what came next.

Unlike the tele-whores, John Martling was devoid of illusions concerning the grandeur about the on-going events in the Midwest. He had been to many of the small towns in the area and set up shop in the various VFW halls and public libraries absent of a proper building for visiting authority.

The town of Delacorte, Iowa, he recalled, once had a public swimming pool that needed to be drained then closed completely on the hottest day of the year once the price of chlorine had proven to be too expensive for the principality to buy in bulk.

“Folks out here are sick of playing along for the most part. I remember it all like yesterday,” a bedraggled Helen Dice, fresh from her latest rehab stint, said to John via Facetime hours after his White House meeting was concluded. The Mac she was using had been donated by Goodwill after news of Helen’s unfortunate circumstances had leaked out.

Along the walls of Helen's living room were pictures of her with various Iowa celebrities such as TV's Roseanne Barr and Major Tum, the Swine who Knew Algebra. They had been scotched taped in place. In the first month of the story, the media had treated Helen with the same horrid fascination that they would conjoined twins. Freakdom was a very minor and vulgar form of celebrity that would fade with time. So much so that Helen had to drive herself to and from the rehab facility in Des Moines that winter. She had to call around to various churches in the area just to rile up support for her son, Fuzzy, who might as well have been disabled (though the Social Security Administration didn't see it that way). The lone reverend she knew on a first name basis, Nan Kramer, wasn't picking up her phone of late. Rumor had it that the news of the Returnees had driven her insane. For herself, Helen had taken it all in stride. It was her decades-long exposure to methamphetamine that allowed her to do so. She was constantly seeing weird things while high on it. She long ago accepted the membrane between phantasm and reality to be permeable and occasionally imperceptible. If it was all supposed to have frightened her, it had not succeeded.

So it was that Helen, like so many other Iowans of her age, could imagine a historical period that was universally referred to as the Good Old Days with hallucinogenic clarity.

"There was a little downtown in Cedar Lake near the college that we used to go to every weekend just to hangout," she said to John who was tolerant of such digressions after his big meeting. He was situated in a basement of the FBI's Quantico headquarters that had the look of a recording studio. It was windowless and reinforced since 9/11, supposedly impervious to terrorist attack. But within its precincts it was impossible to tell if it was night

or day. Martling had dedicated himself to avoiding its embrace at all costs. He once reckoned he spent less than ten hours a year on average inside the basement.

It was his plan to be as quiet as possible on these calls, letting the other attendees react and interact with each other. He thought that Fuzzy Dice established a baseline of behavior for Returnees and he wanted to determine which way his demented behavior was trending. Occasionally a behavioral psychologist named Schwartz would be on the conference call and offer his two cents about the Returnees' mental state. At lunch in a nearby bar over martinis he and Schwartz would compare notes. They were not looking exclusively at Fuzzy. They wanted to know if his mom interacted with him from day to day as well.

Eventually John would assume this talk of the Good Old Days in Delacorte to be a positive sign. This was simply because it was so normal.

"Somebody can look over my shoulder at you two and not notice anything different," John said at one point in the call, hoping that it was true. In the background of the shot Fuzzy was dressed in his dad's Motley Crew t-shirt. He was slouching in the same straight back chair Director Martling insisted he be seated at these biweeklies.

What hair he had on his head was combed over to obscure the patch of still tangible rot on the top of his pate and a good bit of avant-garde (and perhaps involuntarily?) dentistry had been performed on him over the past six weeks. This caused his jawline to assume a normal curvature absent of the gaps that had been created when, upon cutting him down from his noose, the rope had slipped and shattered a fair amount of dentata.

Now from a certain distance he just looked like another middle-aged loser, a prole of the plains who

had gone soft and partially hunchbacked by decades of stress and abuse. If he didn't open his mouth to try and communicate, he could stroll anonymously in the aisles of the local Wal-Mart without drawing excessive attention to himself. Just another drunk on the public dole folks might have figured to look at him. Or maybe he was into something harder than booze.

It was nobody's business what grown men did to their bodies behind closed doors. Maybe a chap such as this would ultimately emerge from his death spiral and be able to live a somewhat normal life. He could fill out an application for the Wal-Mart and eat his lunch in back with the other workers on a picnic table completely coated with bird droppings. The table overlooked a garden of cigarette butts and broken bottles just beyond the loading docks.

In the Good Old Days, Helen Dice was saying as her mentholated cigarette burned down towards her yellow fingertips, she was the ace shortstop on a girls' softball team that went to state finals in Des Moines two years in a row.

"Hit four thirty-eight and four forty-nine respectively," she said to John revivifying the whole thing. "Well, they couldn't throw me out was the thing once I put it in play. A lot of these girls had rag arms. But the thing of it was I could leg 'em out. Probably I could have gotten a scholarship to play softball, maybe at Iowa State. But there was work to do in the cereal factory. Back then they had double-time past forty hours. They had all sort of benefits for you including a car discount and a mortgage program."

For the past six months, John had been hearing this same sob story in various permutations. He was hearing that it was always better "back then." They offered you bonuses and other perks back then. Now, they don't offer you shit. Constantly people

were searching for a path to back then and becoming frustrated when the route they had chosen ended in a dead end. They didn't know what to do. They didn't know what had hit them really.

When the conversation dribbled to a close temporarily, Martling asked Helen how her rehab was going.

"It always goes," she said to him meaning perhaps more than she wanted to. It was hard, she admitted, having to deal simultaneously with her own demons and a retarded son. Or whatever the hell Fuzzy was to be considered now. He just wasn't all there, nor was he in the process of coming back soon. The undeniable changes that came upon him ever since the day of his arrival could not be judged by Helen to be for the better. He was keeping his own company about what he was going through. But it was pretty obvious he would never be whole again. She doubted he could resume his old life back in that room downtown with his friends and his boozing and his stash of pornography that was over a terabyte in size at the time of his untimely passing.

In the time of Martling's last face to face visit, there had been the intercession of a state-appointed social worker on Herbert's behalf.

"The first disability request has been rejected," Helen said of the claim that she and the social worker filed on behalf of Herbert. "But they always say you're rejected the first time regardless. You could be a quadriplegic and you're rejected the first time regardless for disability, they say. Which shouldn't strike anybody as fair."

If Helen wanted, the social worker, who was on the call, could put in a good word, then file an amicus brief or whatever formal process was required on Herbert's behalf.

“I can be convincing when I want to,” he said about his testimony. “I can tell them what you’ve been through and show them the death certificate. I mean, what fucking more would these people need as evidence? I mean, from a legal perspective, a *legal perspective*,” the social worker said trying not to yell. “How much more disabled could you be than fucking dead?”

“He needs a second birth certificate created for him like I prescribed,” John Martling said. “This document needs to be issued stating age at birth which is thirty-two. It’s a simple bit of manipulation,” he said. “That is, if these bureaucrats ever get their heads outta their asses long enough to do their jobs. They’re all scared shitless of so many things. They’re scared of the Yellowstone caldera and the huge rock at Las Palmas that could break off and wipe out the east coast. Well, these are irrational fears. So, it turns all these paper pushers into Biblical prophets. Eventually they’ll snap out of it. But by then they’ll be a lot of collateral damage. They should be better than that if you ask me, less fearful than that if you ask me, and by a good distance. But they’re afraid of dying just as they are afraid of your son,” he said. “And I’m the one they’re most afraid of. Or at least they should be. I mean, even the goddamn president is eating out of my hand. So, if you petition for a second birth certificate, they’ll have to grant it on my OK. I’ll tell ‘em Herbert is a Person of Interest in an on-going FBI investigation and if they deny he is alive I can claim they’re obstructing justice and start making arrests. Once they grant that he is alive, they’ll have no grounds to deny a disability claim anymore. Likely they were exploiting the loophole of him having been declared dead one time to reject the claim. But once they admit he’s a zombie, he’s a zombie for life,” John said. “They’ll

have no legal leg to stand on anymore. It's a protected minority now, according to Trump," he said. "Zombie. So, you can file a discrimination suit on top of it."

According to the shrill social worker, the preferred nomenclature was *Resurrected American*.

"Take all your PC bullshit and stick it up your steam-cleaned rectum," Martling told the social worker. "You ever wonder if it's not all the wokeness and the cancel culture that's at the root of these Risings?" he asked him.

The social worker admitted that he hadn't.

Martling told him, "It's pricks like you that make the Apocalypse seem like a viable alternative. Folks look at you and think, *the Great Beast wouldn't make us state preferred pronouns*. I mean, there are drawbacks to such an arrangement obviously. But they look at you and think *the War in Heaven's already been lost*. God's a free speech fan, or didn't you know? He's got Lenny Bruce records on the original vinyl. He's bookmarked *Infowars* on Chrome. He's got Richard Pryor in his Likes on *Spotify*. He goes for a jog listening to *Bicentennial Nigger* every day."

Being the mercurial sort, John tended to blame all the investigation's troubles on such self-righteous NPC's as this social worker. He thought government workers could and should do better. Well, this was a bit of cliched thinking on his part. But he thought that public servants from the president on down needed to clean up their act. Despite the crisis lessening, he felt the need to cast aspersions on his fellow government employees.

The last confirmed Return had occurred in Bowling Green, Kentucky three weeks ago. Such an interval represented a radical diminution of the rate of resurrection. This was good news, but it couldn't be said in any high-level discussion of the subject.

The system was simply not geared to receive good news.

As ever, the media were doing their best to start a riot.

On CNN, the word “zombie” and “Returnee” were used interchangeably nowadays. The list of knowledgeable public officials to consult on this matter included FBI Director John Martling, his attaché Michael Kay, and Delacorte, Iowa police officer Gerald Hung, who was presently on the video conference. None of these three had made it a habit of leaking to the media. Everything that was said on such matters, therefore, should have been taken as half-truths at best, blooming into lies. The real story was untellable, if only because it was too ambiguous for a public to digest it readily. Hollywood had made a moron of the average jerk. Now, all thought was filtered through the prevailing monomyth that the entertainment industry had forced upon its customers/victims. It was many simple folks’ suspicion that Christ was the hero of this hero narrative. He was soon to (re)emerge from the heavens with a sword for a tongue. At which point so many members of the oligarchy would be fucked. But this myth was preferable to the unvarnished truth, which involved basically sad people being denied their rest by a mysterious fate. Well, it was all too bad, but only John Martling was of the opinion this was so. Everybody else was either hyper-fearful or hyper-skeptical. It all had to add up to something profound to them. They couldn’t imagine a world without a profound intelligence at the controls, no matter how immoral the consciousness behind the intelligence might be.

John had conferenced Hung in from the Delacorte police department. He was the lone municipal officer present pending the four new hires scheduled to arrive next week. Officer Reynard

Hedge had been made Chief as of January when those above him had run afoul of the federal investigation then had simply not shown up for work one day. By week two Reynard himself had been declared a missing person and the official all points lookouts had been activated. By week six he had been placed on permanent leave if only to trigger the hiring of new officers.

Hung had taken Hedge's nameplate down from his cubicle and changed the locks in the police department. His former partner wouldn't be taken back presently. Somebody had claimed to have seen Reynard in south Florida in the Boca Raton region. It might have been that recent events had gotten too hairy for him and he had simply quit.

Blank-faced as always, G.I. sat in the Delacorte chief's small office with his legs crossed elegantly in imitation of the Yakuza thugs he had to deal with on his painful escape to the Midwest from Vietnam.

"In your best estimation," Martling asked him, ignoring for a moment the intense unblinking stare Hung beamed into the computer's camera, "what is the sort of state he will be in come April, when the snows have melted?"

John was talking about Fuzzy Dice solely. As he, being the first known Returnee, had become the investigation's lodestone, its baseline against which all other Returnees were measured. He didn't have to invoke his name to G.I. to give him a sense of who he was discussing. Fuzzy was the only Returnee they had talked about for the last three months.

G.I. Hung hesitated momentarily before answering.

"I'd tell you *exactly the same*," he said to John. "Or I'd tell you he'd be much better. From my perspective I'm saying *better*," officer Hung said. "He's quiet now and generally don't even look at no one. We've measured it like you told us to. He's

down to mouthing one jingle every seventy-two hours. Seems like he's running out of steam slowly. I'd say he's sad if I thought he had the ability to be sad. He seems to be waiting around for something to happen. A signal maybe. Maybe he thinks there's a spaceship waiting to pick him up. Maybe he thinks he shouldn't have tried so hard to dig himself out in the fucking first place. Shouldda stayed underground for good."

Fuzz stayed in his room in his mom's house with the chair turned toward a windowless wall. The room was heavily miked and the various soft sighs coming from his mouth had been digitized, analyzed, and stored in the case's electronic library that Martling insisted be built. Once the case had closed, the library would be stored on a multiplicity of media and entombed in one of those Utah salt mines that are used for millennia-long data storage. Other generations would need this data, he suspected, for their own cases of Resurrection. It might have been that this happened semi-regularly. In the Good Old Days when religion held sway no such scrupulous record keeping was ever attempted. The first Returnee they encountered, if they encountered him, was usually enough to spark a mass panic in those days. Myths accreted around instances of mass terror invariably. And where myth rose history died. Such occurrences were good as lost to posterity.

Officer Hung didn't say it, but he too felt they had entered the shank of this investigation. The Iowa Awoken under his aegis had, after the uttering of the common prayer, assumed the same countenance as Fuzzy. They were all gloomy and un-communicative, albeit in varying states of disrepair. This was owing entirely to their survivors' drive to scrape the vestiges of the grave off them completely. Hung thought they were not long for

this world, though he couldn't put into words how the end would come about. The dreamed-of denouement of the dead where they would simply crawl back into the graves that they once inhabited was a no go. As the EPA had in the past few months placed protective barriers around all the presently unoccupied plots. Maybe like potted plants they would simply stop respiring after a time and begin to re-decay. Maybe they would become normalized to the point that they couldn't be picked out from ordinary people and thus "cease." This last scenario was hardly likely, but it still needed to be considered. If it ever happened, the public would need constant reassurance in the form of some kind of Returnee registry right next to the one presently being prepared for Muslims. Hard to say what the constitutional ramifications of such a scheme were. At this stage obviously all parties involved had bigger fish to fry. They would lock the lawyers in a room to deal with the sovereign rights of zombies when the subject eventuality arose.

Just like Martling, G.I. Hung felt the crisis would resolve itself as of late a distinct lack of energy was present in the invading parties.

"Helen says he don't do anything, don't eat his birds that they trap for him and set free in his room," G.I. told the Director as an aside. "They set the bird loose and they close the door. When he doesn't go after it like before, they re-trap it and break its wings and leave it under his chair for him to eat in stages. Well, it's a cruel thing to have to watch but this is the only way with him. He's gone lazy and soft, I guess. Lost the will to live, you might say. Which if I was him, I'd have lost the will to live too. Maybe death's worse than Iowa in winter, but I guess not. Maybe he's simply waiting for instructions from the mothership or Jesus or what have you."

Also noted by Hung alone was that at an hour before the synchronized prayer Fuzzy was always detected by one of the cameras in his room mouthing the words. As if he was rehearsing for the big moment. Which was a piece of intel that you could do with whatever you wanted. Maybe all it meant was he was slightly forgetful.

Taking this last piece of information, Martling very briefly entertained the theory of Sam Makamba that this was all a staged event initiated by a mystery cult.

“You do the follow-up on Helen like I told you to?” he asked the officer who at present was his only contact in Delacorte. Believe it or not, resources had been stretched thin presently in this case. Martling didn’t mind as there was likely nothing for assigned officers to do once out in the field except construct various blind alleys in the investigation. He had hoped that his meeting today might shake some funding loose if only to keep up appearances. But his impromptu with Trump had suggested that it would not happen. His only concern was with others at the Bureau who would see this threadbare situation as a judgment on his leadership. He was due at a meeting at nine tomorrow with his boss to discuss the same. He had planned to merely nod his head and assent to whatever was asked of him. He thought, really, he shouldn’t be bothered with such details as manpower. He was too distracted anyway to have to offer an opinion on the subject. They should do whatever they felt was best absent of his input and let him know the results later.

There was some strange affect that Hung had noticed of Herbert briefly facing to the east with hands slightly raised daily at two pm. This had been on-going for the past week and only occurred for thirty seconds. During the time there were no

vocalizations to speak of coming from him. There was nothing being communicated by the subject at this time. Merely Hung felt here was another instance of zombie weirdness to analyze and discard. But he felt the need to mention it, nonetheless.

“East, you say,” Martling replied once informed. “East to Mecca...or maybe to Detroit.”

Hung had never thought about a Muslim angle existing in this matter. He wondered aloud if this was what John was driving at.

“I’m not driving at a goddamned thing,” John said. “I used to have a chauffer to do that for me.”

No, he wouldn’t be on this case long enough, he believed, to drive at anything with any sort of success. He had thoughts and suspicions about many things. He didn't consider anything so useful as the investigation itself, preferring instead to let the completely obvious appear to all divorced of any real Holmesian deduction. He knew himself as surrounded by that sort, divorced of an appreciation of cleverness. He would have been obliged to announce how he figured it out anyway. And once this happened, they would have fallen on him for shoddy police work and for merely jumping to conclusions.

Even though he refused to say why that last detail of Hung’s had proven upsetting to him, in a very meandering way John made for his car. It was after six, pitch black outside. Because of the darkness, John was filled with a certain melancholy about the path his career had taken.

“I’ve got nothing to say to you motherfuckers on any subject imaginable,” Martling told the two reporters from *The Washington Post* camped out in the FBI’s public lot that he was forced to walk through to get to his car in the covered private lot. Due to construction, the usual way through the

building had been blocked. Despite complaining to the Director, John had been forced to confront these hacks who wouldn't leave him alone despite the cold shoulder he had routinely given them. He assumed being made to run this gauntlet was just another bit of passive-aggression on his boss's part that would in the meeting tomorrow come back to haunt him. John would offer to resign just as he had on three other occasions in the many months he had been put in charge. As always, his resignation would be refused. Eventually he would go to the new president with a list of complaints, foremost being his boss's being an asshole. He would tell Trump it's either him or me, something of that stripe. He was indignant about the pettiness the brass had shown him thus far. He would provide 45 with an ultimatum and actually quit if he hadn't been given car service up to the headquarters door from now on. He had vowed to stop showing up to the office after a point. All these grubby reporters with their vampiric gazes disturbed him to no end. They seemed utterly impervious to either charm or demonstrations of contempt. To be in their presence was profoundly draining. He viewed having to be in the same area code that they resided in as a punishment.

With such people the best that could be done was to ignore them. But in this case, isolated as he was, it was not an option.

"Is it true," one of the hacks, the male of a boy/girl pairing said to John from behind his shoulder, "that a SAC bunker in Colorado is being repurposed for the government to go underground? Is it true that a list has been drawn up of all the people who will be allowed through the twenty-ton doors?"

If it were true, John, in a less disciplined moment, would have said as much. But the brass

hadn’t told him about it even in passing. If it were true, assuredly neither his nor his agents’ names would be on that guest list despite all they had done for their country over the years.

Not that he would want to be invited down to survive on k-rations and his own recycled urine for lord knew how many months as the apocalyptic horror raged above ground. To him, it was entirely self-evident that a man would want to be on the front lines when the end came. In order that it could over for him as quickly as possible. In order so that he could sleep forever without fear of being thrown back into suffering, into the miasma of this awful world. The survivors would by slow degrees be turned into something less than human by the misery they encountered as mere survivors of society’s end. They would be alive but only in the most trivial biological sense. The privilege that they would have traded on to stay alive a little while longer would in retrospect seem a curse. It was inconceivable to him that they should be envied. But you needed to live a little to be able to realize that there were worse things than dying. Many of these men and women lived in an information bubble. Their death-fear would get the best of them at a point. They would not be thinking straight when they decided to enter the SAC bunker.

When it came time to die, when the end was here, Martling would retire to his DC townhouse and get lit to the point that not even his own extinction would cause him worry. His consignment to hell, he was assured, would be an unjust consignment. He would say as much to He whose Unyielding Law had placed him there. He hadn’t by and large hurt anybody unnecessarily in this life. He had constantly been involved in a series of near tragedies both personal and professional. He had constantly tried to make the best of bad situations. No, he had

nothing to apologize for. He would not do so when Called. When and if he were asked to mouth any last words, he would stare up at the Creator of this World in silent accusation. “Go fuck yourself,” he would say to whatever it was and admit true surprise when the ground underneath him opened and he plummeted into the Lake of Fire. He supposed the uttering of those words would be pleasure enough for a lifetime. Once in the Lake of Fire, perhaps he would be singing a different tune. But presently this was his desired plan.

Maybe he should invite the reporters into the bunker. Then seal ‘em in forever! Assuredly the bunker was deep enough so as to let surface dwellers avoid hearing their cries for mercy. It’d be a nice job for John to transition into after this investigation: the crypt keeper of ink-stained wretches.

As he brushed past them towards his car, the smile such a thought engendered would sure to be taken as smugness by the reporters.

“Good evening,” Martling said to them as he entered the covered, private lot and forgot all about them for another day. When the same scene was enacted twenty-four hours from now, he would for a millisecond be genuinely surprised that they were there. Cynical as they were, they hadn’t been cued into the fact that the government held no secret knowledge about what this was about. They were convinced that if only Martling’s email could be hacked, all would be known. When his email feed was an extended documentation of ass-covering and the construction of cover stories for the Bureau.

Maybe five years, ten years from now, the truth would out. But only when it was safe to do so. And by “truth” he meant the government’s reaction to the crisis at hand, not the reason behind the crisis. The reason behind the crisis he had despaired any

human ever getting to the bottom of. He thought it was all a cosmic joke devoid of a punchline.

On NPR, on the way back to D.C., Martling heard yet another media-anointed “expert” say as much to the stupefied host.

“I think if an angel appeared at the base of the Washington Monument and began to explain in the simplest terms imaginable what was going on, we’d still be no closer to an explanation we’ve longed for over these months,” the “expert” said. “First, you’d need to believe in that which the angel is representing himself as. And that takes a leap of faith. So why not just skip a step and believe whatever you want to in this matter without an appeal to authority? Because even science has limits. Absent a great hoax, there’s little about these events that suggest a single theory. It all simply happened. Or maybe it didn't. But because information is lost to us, I think we’ll never know for sure. And I don’t think we should press the matter.”

The young-sounding NPR host was saying that maybe no explanation was better than a terrifying explanation (that the world was about to end).

“I’m not even going to give you that,” the expert said to the host. After which the segment seemed to conclude prematurely. The host apparently didn't like what the expert had to say. Maybe in her understanding, Apocalypse was preferable to a mere tincture of Apocalypse. She might have thought the expert was letting everybody down with his failure to express certainty on a subject. Now, the expert was expressing certainty of a kind, but this the host failed to see. NPR demanded all its info providers be (as the old newspaper adage went) light, tight, bright, and (most of all) right. She thought perhaps this talk of uncertainty reeked gently of introspection and should be banished from journalism altogether.

Journalism like science was a fact-based profession. To the modern media, wrong facts (i.e., *lies*) were preferable to the agnosticism that the expert was suggesting was the right way to consider the Returnees.

John Martling thought the agnostic approach made the most sense. But, then again, if you didn't think there was any real answer to be had why would you agree to offer your wisdom on the radio?

Such was the hypocrisy of the chattering classes. Only Martling in the depths of his grumpy perceptiveness could apparently see this.

"They haven't a fucking clue about what's happening," he said to himself with smooth satisfaction then eased onto L Street which was his preferred method nowadays of going home. Took him straight through Georgetown, through the multi-million-dollar listings and three-star restaurants that had grown within Washington exponentially over the decades. To him, such sights were a corrective to the squalor of the Midwest and other places within fly-over country he had been forced to visit during the investigation. America was in bad shape certainly. But Washington, well, *official* Washington at any rate, was doing fine. Of course, these two conditions were deeply interrelated. John knew enough about the way the world worked to be slightly ashamed at his attraction to this swanky neighborhood. Likely if justice reigned so much of Georgetown would be turned into public housing for so many out of work West Virginia coal miners. The kitchens of La Jolie Bleue and Clyde's would be opened to serve soup to the poor. But for even a populist presidency that would be too much.

Eventually, in the manner of all inelegantly separating masses, the tension between the two Americas would grow so severe as to create a massive rupture that would take centuries to heal.

“I’m glad I’ll be dead soon,” Martling commented to himself once entering his home through the large front window that he kept unlocked. His house keys as usual were in his office desk drawer, left there as a simple spur to himself to force himself to come into the office. Occasionally on a hectic day he would forget them and be forced to come in through the window. The neighbors were used to this spectacle. Occasionally one of them would approach John and ask why he didn’t get a second pair of keys made. They assumed him a fall-down drunk. This was because of all the times they found him staggering about in a compromised state. They didn't know what he did for a living despite the handgun on his person. They thought him somebody supremely pathetic. They didn't understand why he didn’t seek help for his demons.

Crashing to the hardwood floor of his home’s living room once through, Martling immediately sought out the bottle of Tanqueray on the card table. Usually, he took it with a bit of grapefruit juice. Today, however, he preferred to take hearty pulls from the already half-drained green container. He was in a hurry to get to that place of relative comfort that so many drunks covet. For some reason, the events of the day had weighed on him mightily. The meeting with the president, though successful, had proven particularly draining. His own boss, James Comey, had bailed on the meeting beforehand, leaving John to face the firing squad alone. He had a mind at tomorrow’s meeting to bring this detail up to him and demand an explanation. No, he wasn’t out to steal Comey’s job as he felt it even more thankless than his. But, nevertheless, he had a mind to use his newfound leverage against Comey. He thought the decent thing for Comey to do would at least have been to make an appearance. When you are beleaguered,

the honorable tactic is to present a unified front. He felt very much he had been betrayed by somebody who was supposed to protect him.

Maybe he wouldn't show up at all to the meeting and welcome the reprimand when it came.

"Don't need this shit hardly," he said to himself once a quarter of the bottle was downed and he was on his back on the couch. He had forgotten to close the window that he had fallen through. Presently the breeze was registering in his semi-stupor as a series of small electric shocks along his exposed belly. Around two in the morning when the cold of the room proved bracing enough to rouse him temporarily, he would stumble over to the window to close it. In doing so he would break the index finger on his left hand. It wouldn't be until the next evening that he would feel himself in enough pain to seek the services of a medical professional in urgent care. He would have no recollection of how he had managed to break it and assumed initially it was some manner of internal bleeding. Maybe cancer of the finger. You never knew. He would genuinely have been shocked at the diagnosis when it came.

The TV clicker had been under his gin-soaked girth for twenty minutes before he roused himself to take it in hand.

"*Never felt this vulnerable before, never felt this hot*," a nameless woman, from the perspective of a new viewer, said to a nameless mullet-toting man. She knelt in front of him prior to performing fellatio. *The Playboy Channel*, which John had subscribed to at some point during the past five years, had become the TV's default channel ever since he had been assigned to the case. Softcore pornography was the only fare his delicate visual palate could digest nowadays. It comforted him somehow even as it barely aroused. People, at least men and women (and some women and women), were

friendly to each other in these films. Unlike the real world they were genuinely happy to see each other. Every exchange between them ended with two highly satisfied parties. Whereas, at least on this case, all human interaction tended to argue for the life of a hermit. The world was ending, one suspected, simply because other people, other Americans, were so shitty to each other consistently. It might not have been the First Cause, but it certainly sustained the First Cause. It sustained itself past the point of merely casual worry. Present American reality was an anti-porn of contempt and accusation. In a perfect world it would be outlawed. Only a damaged soul like John Martling could divine the soul in porn. He thought all of TV should be the same as *The Playboy Channel*. Somehow, he found himself flipping to other channels despite such a sentiment. He couldn't help having curiosity get the better of him.

On another channel a game show was recreating Stanley Milgram's obedience experiment. Only this time it was for cash prizes.

"*Remember, they volunteered for this*," a grave voice explained to a nervous-looking contestant just before the button was pushed.

On another channel, another perfect day was closing in the town of Cape Spain, North Carolina. "*We live for moments like this, every moment every breath we take*," a voice, neither male nor female, said. And then a folk song began to play.

A hydrocephalic was on another channel being fitted for a new pair of boots with two-inch soles. "*Martin has always wanted this, or for the longest time anyway he has. Now he has these awesome boots!*"

On *Grey's Anatomy*, yet another patient had died and gone to heaven.

"*Oh, it was so beautiful, so beautiful*," the patient, again nameless, said and then the uplifting music played. It was Jeff Buckley's version of *Hallelujah*. Here it was being used for the eighty-ninth time on network television and for sentimental effect only. Then there was an outro to the local news that would itself have various uplifting stories of hope. Later a network chat show host would make various jokes about President Trump. But by that point the gin would have worked its unsubtle magic on John, and he would see none of it. He had, however, in the day's last cogent moments as Jeff Buckley's soaring voice penetrated his consciousness, an insight as to the nature of Returnees.

They've come back because they hate our guts and want to accuse us face to face. They want to point a collective rotten finger at us as a collective memento mori.

"*The minor fall and the major lift*," Jeff Buckley purred into John Martling's ear just as the curtain on oblivion fell. Indeed, that was the case. But suddenly he found himself rooting for the zombies to win. He realized he had been on the wrong side of history all along.

Chapter Five: Dead Soldiers

Back from the war in ‘71, Fred Wise’s intent had been to settle in California.

“Describe a recent dream to me,” a state-appointed psychologist named Michael Oliver said to Fred once he had entered the final week of his service. This was at the naval air station outside of San Diego.

Fred didn’t know what any of this had to do with the price of tea in China. He didn’t know what sort of hoops he would be made to jump through to realize his dream.

Michael Oliver had a ballpoint pen whose tip he kept touching to his tongue as if it were malfunctioning.

“It doesn’t have to be a good dream or bad dream especially,” he said to Fred. “No, nothing cinematic. It doesn’t have to be something exceptional in any way.”

According to Michael Oliver, a seal of psychological approval was needed from a mental health professional like him for all returning Vietnam Vets before they were allowed to roam within California’s borders unbidden.

“We’re probing for evidence of psychosis in order to weed it out,” he said to corporal Wise by way of an explanation.

Michael Oliver removed the hair from in front of his eyes. Beautiful long blonde hair it was, windblown (though there was not a hint of breeze in this interior office). It was shimmering like the girl’s in the Clairol ad that Wise had jerked off to last night. Thirty seconds after sitting in the chair across from Michael, Fred had been half-convinced he was wearing a wig. But he didn’t dare reach over and pull on it. He sensed the consequences of this meeting. Somehow, he sensed various correct answers needed to be provided to Michael Oliver if he was to regain his former legal standing as a citizen devoid of a disqualifying mark on his record.

Today Michael Oliver was dressed in a red silk shirt unbuttoned only halfway up. He kept touching his flat chest’s pale and hairless skin with his free hand. When he was not licking his pen tip, he would reach in between the folds of the garments with one hand like Napoleon used to. He fascinated himself, apparently. The touch was brief yet compulsive. Ten seconds alone with himself likely Michael’s silk shirt would be off his shoulders and on the floor. He was a coupling unto himself. He was a man devoid of principle or care.

Michael Oliver had a master’s degree in clinical psychology. He was working through the auspices of the army to weed out undesirables. Ever rich, the Republic of California had, circa ’71, grown choosy about who it would allow to take up residency within its boundaries. It felt it had the right to do this to certain veterans. Of course, it had no choice in the matter for so many others. But troubled veterans like Fred Wise were in their eyes on the hook for so much anyway. They were legally allowed to harass this group up to a point. Wise had gotten rough with

a superior officer and now he was paying the price. He was headed for a Section Eight discharge. He was headed for an extended stay in the nuthouse if he didn't think fast.

Before continuing, Michael Oliver, M.S. wondered aloud if Fred or any member of his company had engaged in an act of Vietnamese baby killing, presently so much a part of urban legend.

"We read all about it in the underground papers," he said to Fred recalling for himself just one, *The Berkeley Barb*, that he had read on the train down from Sausalito. Army "grunts" used their bayonets to roast Vietnamese babies over an open flame, the *Barb* claimed, deigning to cite a source for this intel. According to them, this was common knowledge. Or at least it would be once the struggle was won. Whatever struggle that was. This, the *Barb* wasn't so specific about either. Maybe they thought it was self-evident.

Michael Oliver had an open mind. He neither affirmed nor denied the newspaper's accusation. He only asked because he was curious after the answer. He wanted to know what Fred had to say. He never had met a baby killer in real life.

The plastic chair that the corporal had been seated in became oddly creaky when he was composing himself. He thought maybe this was a feature designed to throw him off. He thought the likes of Michael Oliver didn't want him released from the clink. He didn't want him to be able to move up to the Bay Area and be his neighbor.

In fact, Fred Wise had no recollection of either participating in or hearing of baby killing by troops in his multiple tours of duty. He said as much to Michael Oliver and waited for a response. He wondered if this was a good enough answer to allow him to float through.

The back of the piece of paper that Michael was using to take notes in this session had an ad for Del Taco splashed on it. Michael had torn the paper off the bulletin board on the way in.

“Something like that, but more vivid,” Michael said to Fred re-steering the talk to his recalled dreamscape. “No, I’m thinking something raw and unexpurgated, something that in normal circumstances you’d be afraid to reveal to somebody else. This vision needs to cut deep into you for it to be acceptable,” he said. “No, it’s nothing like bringing your date to the prom,” Michael Oliver said. “It’s something more or less horrifying to others. And if it recurs, it recurs constantly until it becomes part of you. It’s not a vision of something external but of how you see yourself. That’s what we’re after here. We’re trolling for insights into the real man.”

There was nothing that Fred could think of along these lines having to do with the war itself. Ever since arriving back stateside, he had dreamt of himself as dead yet fully conscious in the grave. In the vision he could feel the weight of the earth pressing against the coffin lid. He could feel the infiltration of worms and other creatures of the soil beneath his skin.

Gradually a decision independent of his consciousness had been made to strive for the earth’s surface. He would experience such sensation in his dreams as vividly as real life. Somehow the sensation wasn’t as claustrophobic as might have been anticipated. Probably because it was merely dreamt of. He couldn’t imagine if, God forbid, something along those lines actually occurred there would be anything but supreme horror felt until he was able to break free.

There was a Dixie cup full of water under his chair. Fred Wise had taken it hand prior to elaborating.

"It always ends in the same way," he told Michael Oliver of the dream. "With the lid breaking and the dirt rushing in. I can feel it on my chest enough that is stops my breathing," he said to Michael. "Until I wake, I can taste it flowing into my mouth. I can taste it in the back of my throat that has been opened all the time. It's open I suspect because that was the way I was buried," he said. "In the midst of screaming. I lack the will to close it on my own. In the dream, that is," he said. "I'm otherwise a normal person. But I'll let you be the judge of that."

Three tacos, chicken or beef, for forty-nine cents was the special at Del Taco, according to the paper. Labeled *The Immigrant Special*, the deal had fascinated Michael Oliver enough that he was remiss in writing his case notes in a methodical way.

"Usually," he said to Fred after a while, "fear of death indicates some longing after death. As if it is a state you wish to actualize but realize there is no way back from it."

The reason Fred was here in what must be considered a prison was that on the long transport flight home he had pointed a sidearm at a superior officer prior to pointing it at himself.

"If I had to do it over again, I surely would refrain from such improper behavior," he told Michael Oliver who he noticed of late had stopped taking notes. "I was provoked and under great stress at the time," he told him. "Twenty hours straight cooped up in a tiny room in Manilla. Eventually it gets to a man regardless of how tough his exterior. And besides—and the record shows this—I was provoked by the naval officer. He is a self-admitted drunk."

On the C-47 over from Manila, the officer, a naval aviator, had from the depths of his inebriation questioned the validity of corporal Wise's Bronze Star.

"I said 'one of us is man enough to take this bullet without flinching'," Wise told Michael Oliver when prompted to do so. "Of course, doctor, the gun was unloaded. It was standard procedure before boarding an army transport to remove the ammo clip from your gun," Fred told Michael in what would be described in the official report as a "barely intelligible Michigan accent" ("say *ah-pull* not *aaahple*," Michael Oliver said to Fred at one point. "You're not a donkey with no command of the English language," Michael said. "You're not some sort of goofus from the middle of nowhere. Even though you talk like it sometimes. It's embarrassing to both you and me at the same time.").

Wise thought he was past all this. The MP's on board the transport had more or less corroborated his story already. He had been apprised already that there was no chance of a court martial. But for some reason Michael Oliver continued with this line of questioning. He wanted to know exactly what Fred had done on the plane and why he had done it. And he wanted him to repeat this intel in a speech patterns devoid of the flat inflections of the Midwest. For some reason Michael found this accent annoying, worse than even the guttural drawl of the southern rednecks the army had conscripted in disproportionate numbers to make killing machines out of, then shitted out unceremoniously if they were still alive.

The report that Michael Oliver had prepared based on this conversation called for continuous monitoring of Fred Wise by the California State Office of Mental Health.

“As long as you’re in the state’s jurisdiction they’ve got you by the shorthairs,” Fred’s latest C.O. said to him after the report’s issuance. “All the liberal types up in Sacramento are protesting against the war and they’re taking it out on the nearest party,” he said. “They’re trying to claim the oppression of discharged grunts as a mental health issue but we both know that’s a bunch of bull. You’re a grunt. They don’t like you and your kind. That’s the bottom line. They’re angry at Nixon and they’re looking for somebody to take out their anger on. You can grin-and-bear that sort of dislike as you see fit once your discharge has been processed.”

In his mind’s eye, Fred had always imagined himself settling somewhere along the Pacific Coast, preferably in Los Angeles.

“They got beachside cottages, I’ve heard, that you can rent on the cheap.”

Wise had said this to his C.O. on a previous occasion when discussing his far-flung plans. He imagined himself involved with the tourist fishing industry. In Santa Monica, he assumed that he could become involved in tourist fishing because it had been his former trade while growing up on Saginaw Bay. Eventually he planned on buying his own boat that he would offer for charter. Long days would be spent just outside the Santa Monica marina’s breakwater, he assumed. While nights would find him back on dry land to partake in L.A.’s ribald nightlife. Wise, who had spent the entirety of his life thus far in the backcountry of various nation states, could only imagine the ecstasy of LA. Probably a new girl every night would be attainable. He realized out here there were so many aspiring actresses. He thought the ugliest California girl he would ever date would be better looking than the hottest woman in Temple, Michigan.

Thus, the perceived hostility of the California Republic toward his abiding within their borders had hurt Fred deeply. It had registered with him at a profound level. It had sent him into an extended shame spiral.

“I have no idea why they don’t like me,” Wise said to the C.O. a day before his discharge went through. He didn’t expect a constructive reply in return. He thought perhaps he could bury his identity by fleeing to Mexico then coming back months later with false documents. Deep down, he didn’t believe anything would work. Michael Oliver was a bug who had laid its eggs in Frederick’s soul, sprouted wings, and left them there to incubate for an uncertain time until the offspring ate Fred’s brain from within. He was fucked, in other words. He was better off dead.

He neither understood nor truly believed the legal right the State of California had to persecute him in such a manner. Eventually he had stopped defending himself. His lack of education had made him meek in that way. On the hour of his discharge, he headed to a downtown San Diego bus terminal and bought a one-way ticket for the four-day journey back to Temple. Despite such decisiveness he was in no hurry to get back home. But any place was better than this place he figured. His California dream had soured for him almost overnight thanks to Michael Oliver. He didn’t understand himself as the victim he almost certainly was.

Once back home, he found work in the orthopedic shoe factory that was Temple, Michigan’s main employer back in the early 70’s. Wise’s next relevant life event was his death in 2013 via a self-administered gunshot wound to the forehead. Look, he was old by that time. He was looking for a way out.

Taking him for all in all, it was hardly obvious that his suicide was unwarranted. The orthopedic shoe factory, for example, had taken off for Mexico in 1998 leaving the town high and dry. Weeks before his suicide, he had been diagnosed with colon cancer. The modern accoutrements of treatment for the malady had been denied to him due to the governor of Michigan's reluctance to fully fund Medicaid. Lot of ifs and thens bantered about between the time the trigger was pulled and the diagnosis was announced. A social worker wanted to enroll Fred in some flavor of Obamacare. He either didn't have the income level required or he had too much income depending on the broker consulted. And that program didn't start until 2014 regardless.

Poverty was hard to endure. The tribulations that the poor endured daily revealed that the elites considered them merely a replaceable part in a social mechanism whose only purpose was to sustain its own operation.

"We don't have to dwell on causes and recriminations," Mike Kay said in 2017 to a septuagenarian Michael Oliver once getting him on the phone. This was three months after having left his original message. The Humboldt County ashram that Michael Oliver now ran under a Hindi pseudonym discouraged phone usage even amongst its leaders. There was rather a common number linked to a Google account for the entire community that was checked every three weeks or so by the ashram's lawyer. Only those messages with a law enforcement imprimatur had survived the parsing. And of these maybe three at the most would be responded to by the ashram member charged with doing so. And then only under the threat of some sort of legal action by the caller.

Mike Kay was nervous talking to this man who had rechristened himself Devee Baal in 1977. This

was on the heels of a thunderous acid-induced revelation. The revelation included the info tidbit that he was in fact the Divine One, aka God. Hard to say, at least for others, what series of visions had convinced Michael Oliver that this was so. But now, nearly forty years from this revelation, he saw no chance whatsoever that he was wrong.

Devee Baal had just written his memoir, *The Elbow of Divinity*, in which he had said that this was so. Because once you are God, apparently, you do not forget that you are Him for as much as a nanosecond. It's self-evident apparently, just like everything else. And speaking probably was only necessary when the FBI came calling with news of future warrants issued against His former name. Which legally was still His present name, absent an official granting of the change by a California court.

Devee Baal thought he had superpowers. He felt these powers promoted him out of such indignities as asking some dusty-town's magistrate that he be allowed to be called what the universe itself had taken to calling him routinely.

"The last time I asked for forgiveness for a given act," Devee Baal said to the investigator on the other end of the line, "was when I was jesting with a disciple for granting him enlightenment against his will."

Indeed, as part of his godly powers, Devee Baal could on a whim reconfigure the souls of a million individuals at once and in an instant.

"But there's always fallout in such an eventuality," Devee said to Kay when answering the hesitantly asked question why he didn't do so more often. "I mean," he said to Mike, "just think of the conversation I'm having with you now. And consider how with the breath that forms my words your former personality could be completely obliterated. No waiting around. You are the being I have forced

you to become. At such an eventuality, accusations of coercion will fly. So, in the end it's not in my best interests to make you over. Not yet anyways. Not with the attitude you're copping now."

This was a demonstration of the type of spontaneous wisdom that came over the former Michael Oliver when the Fourth Wave of Consciousness washed over him decades ago.

"Now I see everything as clearly as you can hear my voice," Devee Baal said and laughed. His laughter started as a buoyant sound but ended in a coughing fit once his emphysema got the better of him. Then he doubled over. Too many cigarettes over too many years even for God to overcome, apparently. Within four months it would cause him to have to attend the ashram gatherings with an oxygen tank leashed to a plastic feeder tube. He would, as per his standard mindfuck, simply deny that the apparatus was there. Or perhaps he would admit that it was there but deny the ongoing mortification of flesh that it seemed to indicate. On many occasions he had told his followers he would leave his body at a pre-chosen time. Neither cancer nor heart disease would force him from his earthly perch prematurely. He said he was given the gift of immortality upon the Third Wave of Consciousness born on an acid haze. He had slavered three blotters of LSD like a heart-sick dog licking its master's returned face. Then he waited for the cosmos to intervene.

Other men would have gone crazy or died, according to Devee Baal. But he had survived and become the Universe's Lord, able to re-create reality on a whim. It was so strange. But he always thought that he had been chosen for this. He knew himself as brilliant and sexually attractive but otherwise unexceptional. Despite his perfect judgment, he couldn't help feeling blessed.

Back in ’71, he told Kay, he likely was not so circumspect. This was doubly true with Frederick Wise.

“I gave these doughboys a hard time, most likely,” Devee said to Mike, just after a coughing jag had forestalled the communication of any sentiment for five minutes. “Well, you see, they were the ones who implicated themselves in the horror of what they had done. They were drafted, some of them, true. But they chose to answer the call rather than flee to Canada or become a conscientious objector in the face of so much evil being perpetrated. I was the duly appointed representative of the state. But I could do what I wanted,” he said. “No, to me all these men were tainted. In fact, once their discharge came through, they were free to settle anywhere they wanted independent of supervision. It was all a con really, instigated by the state. But we were up in the Bay Area intent on building a better version of America. We were all some way ahead of the curve. We didn’t want any of these baby killers moving next door to any of us. And probably within a few years of moving out here, none of these proles would have been able to afford the rent. So, we were doing them a big favor. We were making it easier for them to reintegrate into society by insisting that they do it someplace else apart from the world we were building.”

California, in the eyes of Devee Baal, encompassed the coastal area from Humboldt County all the way down to San Diego. Merely. The rest of these people who had technically inhabited the state boundaries in the San Fernando Valley up near Eureka where the lumber industry had decades ago fallen on hard times due to so many environmental restrictions, could go fuck themselves.

“My Third Eye opened when the acid infiltrated my brain folds,” Devee told Mike Kay as a non sequitur to a question about his belief in life after death. “Well, here was a situation I thought I might have encountered at some time along the way but was genuinely shocked when it occurred. And once it occurred, I was changed utterly. I felt even less remorse for my actions than I ordinarily would have. And people’s names tend to slip through my grasp nowadays simply because they are so unimportant to me. I recognize the falseness of their identity at a primary level. I feel only pity for their plight. I am not what you might term a humanitarian.”

As far as the plight of the Returnees, Lord Devee Baal repeatedly avowed that this was the first he had heard of them.

“If it is a joke, it is a sublime cosmic joke. It is a practical joke, played on those who are perhaps too wrapped up in their own circumstances to understand that they are the butt of it,” he said to Kay once he had been partially briefed on the matter. In this Enlightened Master’s understanding of the world, death was illusory. Therefore, resurrection was an utterly trivial pursuit. Once he died, in fact, Devee Baal might well return on several occasions himself, although in distinctly less gruesome circumstances than in the ways that were being described to him by Mike. No, he would never be buried, opting instead for cremation and the honored Indian practice of having his ashes consumed in small portions by his followers after several days. He, in fact, had only six disciples to divide those two pounds or so of ash amongst them. They would need to mix the remains in water and, if they were smart, a fruit drink to be able to consume that much material in multiple sittings. The remains of Devee Baal would be of an ordinary nature. The carbonized distillation of a former life was

notoriously hard to commune with even in small sips. A worshipper would require a strong stomach to emerge from the ordeal devoid of any aftereffects or the esophageal scars that a round of prolonged vomiting induced in one invariably.

Best practice for the disciples would to be pour that vile mixture down the crapper, substitute the gray-white powder for some sort of protein-based concoction they bought at a GNC, and swear that they had followed through with their commitment to Master. God was deaf, dumb, and blind anyway. He would simply believe what He was told.

“He’s claiming it’s an act of love, that he does it so that they can one day evolve as he has evolved,” Kay said to Fred Wise’s next of kin, his sister Rose, on an early June evening just after he had gotten off the phone with Devee Baal (or Michael Oliver, or whatever you decided to call him). “It’s a way of having them commune with him after death,” he said. “Like his ash is sacred and maybe it could enter into their bodies and make them sacred just like him,” he said to her. Well, here was an example of profoundly sketchy thinking, even coming from the perspective of a religious cult. Mike had said as much to this elderly guru on several occasions.

Devee told Mike that the entirety of his post-acid existence was some sort of knowing con. He had simply gotten sick of having to show up to work each day. He wanted to live a life less ordinary. Also, he wanted to fuck bubble-brained nubiles in groups of two and three.

“He tells me he makes it up as he goes along,” Mike said to Rose. “He says he knows he’s about to die and wants to suck as much pleasure out of life as he can before he kicks off. What he likes to do from a pleasure standpoint is see how he can get people to do things against their better judgments. He likes to push people’s buttons. Or he likes to

make people push their own buttons and sit back and laugh about it later."

Having an encounter with somebody like Devee should have been enough to drive a person off the edge. Mike wondered if this was something Fred had to endure in the last decades of his life.

"Maybe there's a delayed effect with somebody like him," he said to Rose who was on the other side of her couch staring down at some of the crack in her linoleum floor. "Maybe he's the type who plants a seed in you after meeting him and it's not until years later that it starts to grow. He's somebody who leaves an impression on you despite your best intentions going in. Myself, I don't think I'll ever forget him. There's a sort of casualness to the way he behaves that's frightening. I don't believe you stop thinking about somebody like that even years after your encounter with him is over."

Indeed, Fred Wise referred to him every so often in the bouts of murky communicativeness he was prone to in his final years. Rose would leave the room whenever Michael Oliver's name had started to be uttered, sandwiched in between verbiage of utter nonsense as if the name was being invoked in some sort of maleficent prayer in a forbidden tongue.

"I always thought of him as a made-up person," Rose said of Michael Oliver when the tide of conversation had flowed in a direction that made it seem like she was required to talk. "Something from out of a bad dream, maybe," she said. "According to Fred, it wasn't the war that hurt so much as when the war ended. He wasn't treated with the respect he deserved. This started upon his return. He had that altercation with the naval officer on the plane," she said. "But it wasn't his fault. He said that everything had gone downhill after he had that meeting with the psychologist. He had his heart set

on California, for some reason. He came back to Michigan with his tail between his legs. He really wasn't much fun after that."

Hard to say how after one meeting things could change for a person in such a drastic way. But, then again, Fred Wise had always been an odd duck. He had enlisted in the army rather than getting drafted like everybody else. It wasn't patriotism that drove him to this act so much as the boredom of small-town life. He felt compelled to get the hell out of Temple ASAP. The easiest way was to join the army. He had always believed that if he survived Vietnam a new chapter in his life would open. It would be a transformative experience either way. Thus, the disappointment cut deep when he wound up back in Temple at the same awful factory his father had worked in. Back then, nobody could believe that when the factory closed people would be nostalgic for it. To Fred especially it was place where dreams went to die. He couldn't believe people had walked around such a place as Temple, Michigan and imagined themselves happy. Ever since he was a child this was his abiding view of the place. Which always led you to wonder why he hadn't fought harder for his rights back in California. He wasn't so bashful in other circumstances. He seemed to have been cowed by Michael Oliver past the point of fighting back, let alone triumphing.

"He said the man was evil, just evil. He said this all the time," Rose said to Mike Kay about the present Devee Baal. Now, from a criminological perspective, such a characterization wasn't so useful. In this instance, however, where no crime existed any sort of supernatural reference was enough to perk an investigator's ears and cause him to produce his iPhone from a fold in his cable knit sweater to record the testimony for posterity.

The angle Mike was working was that Fred's interaction with this mystical guru so many decades ago might have led to his present condition. It was weak but you never knew. Perhaps there was such a thing as black magic in this world. Here was the cause of all the FBI's troubles.

Months before, Kay had interviewed Devee Baal. He and various New Age charlatans like him had denied any involvement in the Resurrections. Devee had demurred when asked if he had the power to raise the dead. But he had explicitly denied he was involved in this circumstance. This was back in March when the weather was altogether warmer. Devee said he was God but devoid of the impulse to make a show of it. When he had demonstrated his power, he said, he would have no real need to make a show of it. He could blink, for example, and the moon would vanish. He could transport the earth to another galaxy entirely with a simple hand gesture. He had no cause to manufacture zombies. He said when the time came to make true believers, all would be aware that it was ongoing. He said whatever mystic was behind this chicanery, it was kid's stuff regardless. It was not even worth taking credit for let alone worth denying.

"We're simply tying up loose ends," Kay said to Rose Fisher. He sought out eye contact with the bashful Siamese cat at the room's far edge. He recalled that back in their Iowa townhouse, Jameson had once brought a cat home with him from work. It wasn't that Mike was against cat adoption so much as he was upset that he had not been consulted first. Something like that, he assumed, could weigh on a relationship if one party was foisting the responsibilities of pet ownership on another from out of the blue. This was what he explained to his therapist on the eight appointments he kept with her after Jameson had split back in January. The cat

in question had run away long before he had a showdown with his boyfriend about it. He thought that regardless of if he stood up for himself the cat would have been allowed to stay. He knew this relationship as asymmetrical. It was based on need as opposed to happiness. But he never did the right thing for himself. He had not read Jameson the riot act before Jameson had a chance simply to vanish on his own.

With Devee Baal out of the picture regarding a possible metaphysical instigator (not that he ever was a real suspect. What if he said I did it? What if he said: *It was me and my magic powers*? What then?), Mike wanted to know why Rose and her family hadn't yet visited Fred in the apartment that they had procured for him.

"It would have been a nice gesture," she said to him, "only as viewed by others. It would have been a moment that you could teach your kids about concerning the need to help those less fortunate than you. Because if he turns out to be immortal, I don't think it's going too far out on a limb to claim that he is more unfortunate than you. He doesn't seem too happy even by Returnee standards. Now that he has a window in his room, he keeps staring out of it as if expecting company. I don't think you coming to see him will make much of a difference really. But at least it would be something to tell your kids about. Tell 'em about the need to be kind to the downtrodden. You could sit with him for a few minutes at the most then leave. Say his name and see if he answers you. We would all be knocked out if he answered you, but you could try anyway. Occasionally there is the light of recognition that enters his eyes. And maybe you being there would bring it up to him."

The FBI had long-since established its Returnee normalization program. As so dictated by President

Trump, homes and photo-ops were the order of the day for all Returnees, less so lobotomies and sodium pentothal injections. Months had gone by since the last of them had crawled up from the grave. So, it had started to be speculated, on the hundreds of specialty sites and media dedicated to same, that the worst of the worst was over. Whatever had happened to trigger this unprecedented event seemed to have run its course. Or if it had not run its course, a celestial cause would be ruled out (and all consulted clergy had agreed on this). As God's Wrath was nothing if not indefatigable. Wise the war hero had been treated warmly by all parties concerned. Mike's job description over the past six weeks had morphed into that of a personal concierge for Fred. A twelve hundred square foot house overlooking Saginaw Bay was in the midst of being constructed for him. It had been donated through a fund Trump himself had started. Not necessarily what one might call independently viable, Fred may or may not have wound up spending time there in the Fall when it was scheduled for completion. Probably for the first few weeks, Rose and this cute male nurse who had been roped into caring for Fred would have to move in. The same frayed social safety net that was supposed to take care of the elderly in this country would be brought to bear to save Fred Wise from having to live on the periphery of the same Wal-Mart parking lot he was discovered in. He had already been granted Medicare and Social Security benefits, for example, even though he had not applied. So, everything was set. If only he could mouth a sentence of gratitude. He seemed especially out of it to Mike. He had been one of the last Returnees awoken. And he was far scarier to contemplate than any of the others, at least from close-up. There was an intentional aspect to his

obliviousness that was hard to articulate. He might have simply been a bastard in real life. And here was a trait that was returning to him just like that weird wandering right eye that the doctor Kay had ever consulted on the subject had attributed entirely to exposure to Agent Orange.

Nowadays, Kay's job was pure PR. This was as directed by John Martling. It was Martling himself who had prodded Mike to try and ween a photo-op out of Rose. For some reason, she was proving resistant to the suggestion. She and her kin obviously had some problem with Fred while he was alive. To Mike, he seemed more victim than victimizer, at least based on the modest intel Rose conferred. Moreover, Rose claimed not to be remotely suspicious. She felt sorry for her other kin more than Fred. She had known the peace he had attained in death as a blessed occasion. Somehow, she was insistent on preserving the corpse that he once was. In a matter of speaking.

Unlike any of the smokers Mike Kay had ever met, Rose Fisher used a cigarette holder as a bridge between the fag's filter and her chapped lips.

"We heard of these goddamn returns, zombie uprising or whatever you wanted to call it," she said to Mike, "and immediately we took measures against it. Somehow, this was the way we suspected it would end for him. He was cursed to suffer in this way," she told him. Then she moved the lighter around.

"So," she said, "we did the best we could with the family mausoleum. Well, somebody shouldda sat in there and waited for him to rise and cut his fucking head off once he did! No, we were not happy any of us to see him again," Rose said. "We think it's all a game. We think it was started by those in power. Maybe by the CIA," she told Mike. "Maybe by something with more power than the

CIA. Some shadow organization that doesn't even have an official name," she said. "Oh, I suspect there are so many of those active in this world! Nothing happens for no reason," she told Mike. "I betcha it goes back to his army days where he volunteered or something. And now he's fucked for eternity! They won't leave him alone until they're all in the ground themselves. And who knows how long that might take. They're recruiting new members daily probably. They're self-sustaining, these black ops. They're like some fucking parasite that can't be killed once they get their fangs into you. They're nothing that can be overcome by goodwill alone."

Rose's fondest wish was for President Trump to mobilize the national guard at some point. He had promised to do this, according to her.

"You gather up all these zombies and march 'em into an incinerator," Rose said, momentarily shifting the holder from the left side of her mouth to her right. "No, I seen a documentary on Nazi Germany where back in the forties they had these. The incinerators, not the fucking zombies. So, don't tell me they can't be built nowadays," she said. "You herd 'em in there and light a fire and see what happens," she said to Kay. "Well, what could be the worst that takes place anyway?" she said. "Nothing happens. They're impervious to fire. Or they become ash and start to reform. In which case you start the process all over again. It's so simple, all of it," Rose said and grimaced slightly revealing for Mike Kay the span of missing molars in the back of her mouth. He couldn't help wondering if there was a connection between this disfigurement and the cigarette holder. Perhaps she was a cancer victim and believed the cigarette holder had the power to filter out the smoke's noxious elements. Whatever was the case, he decided she certainly was in the process of giving rednecks a bad name. All the talk

about Nazi incinerators should have dissuaded anybody with mainstream political views from dialoguing with her further, at least on this issue. Maybe she didn't realize how it sounded. Or perhaps she did realize and was simply trying to get Mike Kay to leave. Probably there was a history between her and her brother that she was reluctant to share. Upon first letting Kay in, she had embarked on a jag concerning her rights. She said she had a right not to have to sit with her brother. Would go to jail rather than have to be in his presence, she said. For some reason, she wanted nothing to do with him. Perhaps the notion that he had been touched by evil had something to do with it. Well, she wasn't self-consciously religious in the way of so many of the protestors Kay had encountered in Delacorte. Which led Mike to believe that maybe Rose was simply that way. Life had been too rough on Rose Fisher for her to generate compassion for somebody else. The orthopedic shoe factory had been her employer for twenty years prior to its demise. She had intimated to Mike that she had married entirely out of economic distress. And now here she was being put upon once more. Her only regret was that she hadn't stayed in the family mausoleum with a huge carving knife to do what must be done.

Leaving the cramped quarters of the Fishers' manufactured abode, Kay had made up his mind to lie about the level of cooperation he had garnered from Rose. If only to get Director Martling off his back, he needed that good news communicated. He understood what was required of him and was willing to be unethical regarding its realization. He had acquired his cynicism in stages. This was in contrast to John Martling where it seemed to happen all at once.

"I have nothing to say to him about this case that he either didn't already know or simply doesn't

want to hear," Kay told Viv Harwood, a private detective and, of late, some time sex partner of Mike's. After Sam Makamba's May Day dismissal from the Bureau, Viv constituted Kay's lone social contact in Temple. "It's entered an absurd stage," he said. Past this point, I don't even want to comment on it. The Director doesn't like it, I'm assuming. He doesn't like it that Fred the war hero's estranged from his family. It's bad PR. They want to invite him to the White House eventually. But the media have been to Rose's house already and they have all these nasty comments from her. The same comments she told me," he said.

"The fact that the president is requesting her to toe the line doesn't register with her at all. I told her this once and she said to me 'Donald who?' She's one of these prickly rural types who lives by her own rules. Trump and the whole of the FBI could be banging on her front door and she wouldn't budge. Probably in that eventuality even she would dig in her heels. She doesn't think she owes the world a goddamn thing," Mike said and looked around for a cigarette to smoke.

Naked, now post-coitus, spooning in an obvious way that had Jameson had been in the room with them he would have derided constantly for weeks on end, nevertheless, Mike felt it was only civil to make small talk. The only small talk Viv seemed to be interested in regarded the case. His client was due in Temple at any moment. She was a strange iconoclast from the middle of nowhere who one day had the fear of God blasted into her. She was a religious ironist who became a fundamentalist overnight. She smoked a pipe and wore men's jeans. She talked about the Returnees like she knew one personally. She gave her stated occupation as Unitarian minister, but Viv Harwood had his doubts.

She seemed more like a dyke stevedore to him than a Woman of God.

Viv needed an impressive song to sing to her (or him, if the case should keep on flowing). He needed to say something absent of what was already to be found on the internet, albeit in the form of rumor.

The possibility Viv offered for Rose Fisher's inexplicable behavior was that she had made a deal with this diabolic figure, the California guru Devee Baal. Now she was feeling slightly guilty about it. He thought it was all about magic of some nefarious variety. He might not have thought this deep down, but he felt it was a good song to sing to a gullible client. That's all that mattered here. The blonde guru from California in this regard was a gift from God. Viv thought it could keep the fire of a Returnee mystery going for consecutive years. He had speculated about alien interference for months on end before attributing it all to a CIA experiment gone wrong. He thought he had only so many more narrative shifts to peddle to a public whose hunger about the Midwest Resurrections was cooling. The public had a fickle attention span that was proving counterproductive to Viv's attempts at an early retirement. He had three other prospective clients that he was tempting with informational tidbits. He assumed within two weeks they would be onto another subject entirely. To them, life and television had long since converged. They were about to change the channel on the Returnees. And they needed some sort of dramatic plot twist to keep them involved.

Viv stared at a wall in a Holiday Inn on the outskirts of Saginaw. On the wall that he stared at was hung a painting of a man staring at a wall.

Viv was attempting to engineer some dramatic moment of reckoning between Fred Wise's advocates and the mystery man in California. It was

impossible to say what the man in the painting was attempting as he stared. It was impossible to say if he and the wall he stared at was on the outskirts of Saginaw. Or was even in the same universe as Viv and his wall.

These things are impossible to ascertain on one's own. But it would have been altogether strange if the starer at one wall was the same as the starer of the other. That is, if reality and a representation of reality had merged. There was nothing to choose between them. Which would have explained a great deal about the recent strange events in the Midwest.

Viv Harwood blinked several times before continuing.

"I think," he finally said to Kay, "it would be really meaningful if you brought this guru face to face with the man he had so wronged all those years back."

Even by Viv's standards this made no sense. Mike Kay said this to him plainly. Their sex life of late had been stale as month old bread, mostly with Viv remaining passive on his back. He claimed to be a shy fuck, but over the past few days Kay had come to believe he wasn't even gay.

Not even gay!

Merely, he was using his undeniable cuteness against Mike to pry information from him. Such hidden camera-style subterfuge seemed a bit extreme. But Kay was a neophyte in Harwood's world. There, such game playing could have gone on all the time for all he knew. More likely, however, Harwood was an extreme example of a man who had taken his job too seriously. He knew too much about the case to believe he was in the midst of cracking anything. The mystery was a mystery and always would be. But Viv had entered an investigatory mode so deeply that it was impossible

to drag him out of it even when a kindly stranger such as Mike pointed this out to him repeatedly.

Unlike so many others charged with investigating these phenomena, Viv looked at the impenetrability of the mystery as a type of positive characteristic that he could exploit for his own ends.

"We can make anything of it that we want, you and I," he said to Mike one day in the shower during an unguarded moment. Immediately he had to backtrack. All the unwanted sexual attention of late had put him off his game and made him say things to Mike that he otherwise wouldn't have done if his mind was fully focused. Constantly in Kay's presence, he was trying to disassociate. This made him seem slightly stoned. It had been several months since he had told Mike his true profession. The old state trooper's uniform was presently in the back of his bedroom closet back home in a black garbage bag sealed with masking tape. He was waiting for an opportune moment to throw it out on the sly. He assumed for some reason his apartment was under surveillance and his garbage was being rifled through. He assumed, despite Mike Kay's assurances, he had been ratted out to Prevailing Authority.

When he suggested that Mike could make anything of it that he wanted, he was not suggesting anything close to fraud. Rather, he was angling for a perpetuation of the investigation.

"There are so many theories to work, questions to be raised," he said. "Offhand, I don't think either you or I can believe our job done if we didn't first look into every scenario possible," he said.

The California guru was a great new angle to work if only because of the otherness his description had seemed to suggest. Well past seventy, nevertheless, Devee Baal could be flown out to Michigan in whatever get up he chose to clad

himself in. At which point the G-men would parade him around for the cameras. If he had anything obnoxious or imperious to say to the media, so much the better from Viv Harwood's perspective. To Viv, it didn't matter what the FBI made of him so long as various interested onlookers could identify some nefarious edge within him. Devee was a grifter *par excellence*. Let him get lawyered up and refuse to help. Viv thought this too could be beneficial. He was desperately afraid that the investigation was winding down. His meal ticket, therefore, was expiring. He didn't want to wind up like one of those UFO enthusiasts trying to scratch out a living amongst the paranoid and lost. He didn't want to have to move back in with his brother in Hamtramck simply because he had run out of conspiracy theories to peddle.

As far as Kay was concerned, however, the Devee Baal angle was DOA. Simply because Rose Fisher refused to endorse it.

"She hates him and hates her brother," he said to Viv as he struggled in the room's shuttered gloom to find his casually discarded clothes. "I don't know what you do with a person like that," he said of Rose Fisher, recalling the solemnness of her face when greeting him at the door. "She didn't seem happy to help. If we hadn't implied there would be some sort of legal ramifications to her stonewalling us, she wouldn't have said shit. She gave the impression that if you were drowning, she wouldn't so much as call for help."

Maybe dig some dirt up on the bitch then and use it as blackmail, Viv Harwood thought turning his back on Mike. Oh, he supposed he was supposed to feel guilty about his actions in this room, but he couldn't seem to. What difference did it make anyway? He was squeamish about sucking dick, but that was his hang-up. He supposed it could be

overcome in time. He thought himself as somebody above the fray in this regard. He had no fixed concept of himself as either straight, gay, queer, or bi. He supposed he could be compelled to fuck a dog in public if he felt it was in his interests to do so. Look, it was all sad flesh for the most part. It all came from the same place pretty much. There was no shame in any of it. He didn't think there was any sort of super-being in the universe that would judge him negatively simply for keeping body and soul alive.

Rose Fisher, he suspected, was the fly in the ointment he had been anticipating all along. Eventually she would need to be dealt with in a very harsh way. She knew something about all this but had no intention of sharing. Mike despised that sort of attribute in people. He would communicate this to her in no uncertain terms eventually.

In Iceland, the big volcano, Katla, had erupted recently and injected enough ash into the stratosphere to send the temperatures in Michigan plummeting. Today’s projected high of fifty-one degrees was twenty degrees below the norm for this time of year. In addition, a sooty, non-purgative rain would start to fall almost spontaneously from skies that minutes ago had seemed devoid of precipitation. To Viv Harwood, the weather seemed suitably eschatological to fit into subsequent events in the Midwest. Rather than being put off by the icy drizzle’s chilling presence, Viv, when it started, was reminded how abruptly the effect had presented itself to the world. Might well have been the sign that a whole new period of pain was due to the planet earth in the form of Godly condemnation. Or it might have been one of these naturally occurring events that signified nothing more than a cycle coming three-sixty, absent of consciousness and

repeating itself incessantly because of an inability for it to do anything different.

Occurring in an overcast sky, it caused reflective souls to think about a greater darkness to come. Whether arriving as a collective smiting or in a slow narcotizing drip (as was the way of all flesh at the moment), it made very little difference to the affected.

Vaguely once, if only to forestall further unpleasant coital acts, Viv had promised to show Mike around historical Saginaw, if only as an ironic goof. No, there was very little here to hold the common tourist's attention any longer than the span of a television commercial. In Saginaw, there was a little two block downtown running just outside the hotel down to a river the color of the raw sewage that was rumored to have been pouring into it for the past six years. This was ever since the treatment plant in Detroit that had absorbed the excess was shut down for repairs. In the center of town was a Ferris Wheel devoid of a motor or cars. It was simply an enormous rusty sculpture. Regardless if this had been its intention, Mike thought this was a monstrosity that the city fathers (if there was such a thing still) should scrap as quickly as they might. He thought such a site would cause newcomers to seek the latest flight out of town as quickly as they might. It was an evocation of Rust Belt blight. He thought it had no place in a community doing its best to put on a brave face.

The world's largest tire donated by the Firestones of Ohio was nowhere to be seen, relocated according to a passer-by due to a terrorist scare.

"They say you could stare through the tire's hole and see oblivion," Viv said to Mike Kay who was walking in front of him. Seeing the town like this in such gloomy weather, this formerly thriving (or at

least livable) central Michigan burg focused Mike's imagination. He considered all that had been going on for the past ten months. The Returnees were the Greek chorus of an ongoing American tragedy recently arrived on stage. There was no real evidence to support the connection, but Mike couldn't seem to separate downtown Saginaw's downfall from all the holy terrors he had witnessed for so long in his role as the Deputy Director's attaché. Indeed, many of the Risen's carious faces bore a distinct resemblance to the city's pot-holed thoroughfares that he and Viv were forced to cross on their way to the apparently mythical sights. The town's most impressive building, for example, was a long-shuttered hotel equipped with a single light on its twenty-story façade. This feature was meant to forestall a plane crash into its dark facade. The prudent course of action would have been to take a wrecking ball to it. But many of the town's residents believed this would just be giving up. Patch.com had rumors concerning a potential buyer for the building. This would revive downtown by itself supposedly. Like so many other dying places, the relatively vibrant past had run into the decaying present and muddled folks' minds for good. Locals, if any could be found, would take you by the arm, for example, and show you the Jacobson's department store on Genesee Boulevard that presently appeared to strangers as a federal government warehouse housing archaic prostheses from deceased veterans. There were several fine steakhouses around here supposedly, just in the shadow of the giant black tire. Buick manufacturing was here way back when. They shut down production three years after Fred Wise's return. They had taken a wrecking ball to that factory in '78. Perhaps it was under orders from the newly created Environmental Protection Agency who had

declared the site contaminated. They atomized the place and buried the remains in landfill. Now it's noted as Buick Park on the town's outskirts. Which is more or less sixty acres of nothing. Junkies liked to stray out to Buick Park in warmer weather to do their thing. Nobody would fuck with them out there, they knew. The place was haunted with the ghosts of dead machines. The Saginaw PD considered it an unincorporated area.

"It's easy to see why Fred wanted to escape from this place to sunny LA," Kay said to Viv Harwood. He hesitated a moment as a soggy wooden plank on the pier they had wandered into groaned underneath his left heel.

It couldn't be that Prevailing Authority would leave such a public hazard as a rotted pier slat in place without so much as marking it as such beforehand. At the very least, somebody must have tested the entire pier for its resilience. Must have been a ten-foot fall into shallow water but that was not the point. Mike was mildly assured that Saginaw, Michigan was still part of the United States. He couldn't believe that at the federal level such decay had been allowed to progress unbidden. OSHA should have put a stop to it via a federal lawsuit. At the very least they should have stretched a plastic safety net under the pier to forestall the possibility of a person landing in the chilled sludge below once they had fallen through.

Here, all human events were affected by the dreariness of the surroundings. This was up until dreariness became a common trait that so many residents shared. So many were pessimistic about so many things nowadays that words eluded them. The Detroit Tigers, for example, were in first place presently but this didn't raise anybody's spirits locally. They assumed a losing streak would soon be encountered that would ruin their season. It had

always happened that way. Bad things happened here as a matter of course. As if they were God-ordained.

There was a tour of local Great Lakes shipwrecks that Viv and Mike wanted to go on before the sulfurous rains descended.

“If you fall in, head for shore,” was the tour guide captain’s advice to his three passengers as they departed from the dock towards Lake Huron. The life preservers they had been given were devoid of straps or directions for use. So, they had sat unused underneath the two-deck boat’s top bench. The water was cold this time of year but there didn’t seem any real danger associated with this trip. The water was brown yet still like an unvarnished tabletop. And every two hundred yards or so a bit of floating lumber was encountered that could double as a lifeboat in a pinch should one of the Great Lakes’ famous shoals be encountered.

Though an inland waterway, these northern lakes had taken a surprising number of ships to Davy Jones’ locker over the centuries.

“The weather up here is unpredictable,” the captain told them as the tour commenced in earnest. “A relatively shallow bottom around here made for a dangerous trip before it was mapped,” he said through the ship’s PA, a crackly device that itself seemed to have predated oceanography. “So much iron ore was carried from the north country down to Lake Erie,” he said, “that when one of these freighters sank the water turned red temporarily. There were lighthouses that guided the way, but these didn’t protect against the storms. A gale in 1913 was described as a hurricane on land by those who had to live through it,” he said. “Two hundred fifty souls met their maker on that single day where five ships were capsized! The bodies were never

recovered," the captain said. "If you been paying attention this should stand to you as obvious."

Because of the tea-colored water, the wrecks were nearly invisible. But that didn't stop the cap'n from waxing philosophical on the matter.

"The *Charles S. Price* right here," he said pointing to a non-descript patch of water off starboard. "Lost in the aforementioned gale, was witnessed floating upside down before it sank. Wreck was not found until the 1960s when it was discovered by Dr. Resbert R. Martin of the Hail Atlantis fleet. No survivors to speak of, as you might have assumed. But there actually might have been and nobody was assigned with the duty of keeping an accurate accounting."

As Gordon Lightfoot's *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* occupied a privileged space in several of his Spotify lists, Mike found it strange why this steady feed of info had registered with him as pathetic. He had a sweet tooth for this sad tragic stuff, he would have thought. But presently it registered with him as kitsch. Constantly he and Viv were stealing glances down at their shoe tops attempting not to giggle. The space between the aforementioned dead and the living was too great to spark a type of kinship. Because, regardless of the manner of their demise, the dead were dead now. Even if drowning in icy water was a particularly horrible way to go.

Mike wondered why these dead were more privileged than anybody else's dead, including those of the present age. Perhaps a hundred years from now, gentlemen would attend a shambolic tour of Temple, Michigan and stroll by the Fred Wise Mausoleum while attempting to stifle a laugh. Such irreverence was not an ordinary human failing. Merely, it was a simple admittance that the universe itself argued against meaning. Existence enforced a

type of forgetfulness while on an entropic glidepath. Everything decayed, everything changed from a highly ordered state into something less so. Ultimate information loss was the fate of a trillion worlds. But, nevertheless, (and illogically) death, entropy's biological representative, was seen as awesome and exceptional. This was hardly the case from a scientific perspective. Men likely revered death only because of their personal fear of extinction. They were chickenshit and dumb. Enlightened souls merely shrugged at death's presence. But to become enlightened, a man would first have to admit that society was doomed. That was too bitter a pill for most to swallow. So, death-worship continued unabated.

Ninety minutes out, the tour boat entered a stretch of water the captain had termed Shipwreck Row.

"Just out of curiosity," Viv Harwood said to the captain yelling down to him, "how long is this tour anyway? We assumed two hours, max. But we're not even halfway done looks like!"

Volcanic-driven rain fell from an otherwise clear sky. It caused the two sightseers to reminisce about the pleasures of a contained indoor facility. Somehow, they had assumed there would actually be sights to see on this sightseeing expedition. They might have thought the boat had a glass bottom to it. Or the water underneath them would be clear enough to take a gander at the wrecks for themselves.

The captain had an answer for them. Such replies he proceeded to communicate in action alone.

"Ramming speed achieved," he said to himself, finding the giant rusty propeller, product of 1930, he knew was situated on a sandbar two feet above the water's surface. He guided his tour boat over it

expertly and created a five-foot gash in his starboard hull.

“If you fall in head for shore,” he told his guests then emitted a pleasurable sigh as both the craft and his span of painful memories began to take on water. He was sick of this shit, basically. He was sick of these two fags and their bad attitudes.

Recently, the captain had been diagnosed with late stage lung cancer. And he had a deep kinship with the dead of Saginaw Bay. To him, drowning was like coming home.

They were ten miles from shore in fifty-eight-degree water. But he told Mike and Viv to head for shore anyway. He was required by nautical law to radio in a distress call, but fat chance of that happening. He, whose name was intentionally removed from this narrative, was utterly serene at this moment. He thought soon he would be home amongst the dead. The *happy* dead. Which was more than one could say about many of his fellow Michiganders nowadays.

The captain shoulda taught a class on how to abide in Shipwreck Row. But he doubted he would have been allowed to do so because of so many onerous OSHA regulations. His boat’s life preservers were stuffed with ordinary rags and bits of newsprint, for example. You put one of these around your neck while overboard and you would sink to the bottom of the Big Mudpuddle forthwith.

If queried, he would readily admit that they never should have been brought on board on anything like a pleasure cruise. But nobody ever asked him about them. It was their loss, actually. He was very sincere in his wish to die. He didn’t have an atom of irony left in his soul. *Finis*.

Chapter Six: End Times

During those last melancholic days of autumn, Helen Dice would retreat to her webby attic. Once there, she would rifle through her “memory books” as she called her family photo albums. She was in search of surety. To her, this was an antidote to the pervasive dread of death (which itself was the extinction of the ability to recall). To her, this was the only way to stay sane.

“It never was like how it was before,” Helen said to her new friend (or maybe it was her old friend recently recalled), P.S. Rinkley, while considering the past. “Even when it was before.”

This was really a mouthful for her. And she feared initially P.S. (standing for P.S.) might not catch her drift.

“I’m saying, you can’t compare the way you remember something to the way it really was,” she told him. As she spoke, one hand was on Rinkley’s hairless right arm. Having shown up one rainy morning along with various wriggling worms on the sidewalk, nevertheless, he was welcome in her home.

He was temperate as a hat rack for starters. At this historical moment, such asceticism was deeply welcome. He didn’t seem to fear the end like so many others.

Helen probably hadn't used the best words when she tried to recall the past. But once they were uttered, she felt protective of them. As if they were her children.

"I was here at the Clear Lake Reservoir with Fuzzy," Helen said pointing to one Polaroid. "But for the life of me now I cannot remember it," she said.

Rinkley, who was a doctor of phrenology, was neither leaning over expectantly nor slumped in boredom as she spoke. He was impassive as stone. He had a scientific bearing that dovetailed into a sociopathic disinterest in humanity. He liked humans for their skulls alone, not for the brains underneath. The brains he would just assume scoop out and eat for dessert. He thought himself supremely entitled. Not even God could distinguish between him and a nightmare figment. He, Rinkley, considered the distinction moot.

Helen Dice flipped the page of her memory book.

"Here's the photo marked 1976," she said to P.S. "This was right around the time of the Bicentennial. Which I recall was hot. Well," she said, "it might have been cold but then again. I have memories of wearing a short-sleeved shirt under a sweater. Unless I took the sweater off or maybe went inside and took a bath. In which case I wouldn't be wearing, you'd have to assume, very much of anything at all."

Memory was the false report of a dead event resurrected. Rinkley, doctor Rinkley, agreed with Helen amiably enough on this point. At that moment he seemed to suddenly ease into his own indefiniteness. As if he was a hologram being made aware of his own contingent nature.

He was standing flat-footed. But at the same time, he seemed deeply at rest. The decals he wore for eyes were fraying at the edges, threatening to

roll up on themselves. This by itself wouldn't be a cause of alarm for either of them probably. Given such an occurrence, however, he would need to excuse himself to the restroom for a few minutes. He felt the perverse need to preserve decorum at all times. He had a glue stick in his pocket that he brought along just for this occasion.

On the interior of each chalky forearm, P.S. Rinkley sported a tattoo of the Hebrew letter *Qof*, pronounced as a K. As he would aver, such symbolism meant absolutely nothing either to him or the world surrounding him. It was merely a sound some people made when they passed from life to death. When one died, the breath rushed out of the abdomen and pushed through clenched teeth and made the sound. Merely. There was no sort of intent to it at all. Nothing was trying to be said by the deceased.

Whenever Rinkley was asked about these markings, he would say the same more or less, using slightly elevated diction.

"Here is a universal exhalation requiring little in the way of translation or despair," he would claim on the increasingly frequent occasions somebody would query about the tats. The questioners had originally thought they had something to do with the Hebrew lettering on the Returnees. They had thought erroneously that a piece of the cosmic puzzle was before them. Whereas here merely was a simple protest against meaning. As a phoneme absent of a word.

The acclaimed phrenologist was not any sort of chatterbox who had placed the glyphs there to generate interest.

"More or less, and as long as I can recall," he told Helen of the *Qof*s when the subject was broached on the occasion of their first meeting, "they came with the territory. Grew that way as I

grew that way. And my ideas formed along with their letterform," he said. "When the terminal was in place my journey was complete. And there was little about them that I had to refer to ever again. Except to know what some stranger was staring at when they perchance asked me to roll up my sleeve a little more."

K was the dead sound, the sound of breath rattling around a parched trachea and stopping halfway up. Dr. Rinkley offered neither salutation nor opprobrium at its presence in the world. He knew, however, people would sooner jump from one of its parapets perched a thousand feet over the ground then hear it in isolation.

"They have their delusions," he said of these people. "It is my assumption that they wish to keep these delusions foremost in their minds forever."

P.S. repeated this sentiment when the subject turned in a gradual way to the persistence of memory. "But all we need to know (and this, madam, should be expressed as an unalterable truth!) is that the true nature of things is entirely hidden from us. For simple humans certainly it is. As would also be the case if we later became angelic creatures of sublime understanding," he said. "We cannot, any of us, truly understand the nature of reality. As we are part of that reality, you see. When we query, our querying alters the universe and changes the answer. Even God (should He, during the magical efforts that He is known for, rescue himself from the muck of myth) would admit bafflement at His primary circumstances: *why am I here*? And more deeply: *Why is there a here as opposed to no-thing*? Even for the Heavenly Creator, it is an impossible question to answer. Because He is existent. Therefore, He is ignorant of so much. Only the Lord of Nothing can boast omniscience. But any sort of creature who does not exist would be

notoriously tight-lipped when it comes to presenting pearls of wisdom to a seeker."

Job the Sufferer, Dr. Rinkley recalled, in a Bible's alternate rendering, ascended Mt. Caramel to ask after the cause of his continued abuse. *Hard to say how come*, God told him. He then issued Job a dead-eyed stare. As if the question caused God no end of annoyance.

During the past few days Helen Dice had taken to placing the tracings of dead maple leaves in a strong box with a lock on it to see if they might match their referent later on.

"I'm afraid to look," she told the doctor.

Even P.S. Rinkley found this surprising.

"My dear," he said to her, "afraid of what, do you recall?"

As if about to cross the street, Helen Dice looked both ways before answering.

"I'll look at a maple leaf," she told him, "and it'll have become an oak leaf. Just like that. No comments or explanations! And then we'll all have something else to worry about altogether. It's called the Mandela Effect, I think. We all know what the answer is, but I'll worry about it anyway. It's another tell-tale sign, I guess. But I can't keep myself from looking."

The maple and oak trees, according to Dr. Rinkley, were both deciduous organisms. They were both native to the northern parts of America.

"Perhaps it's a change within phyla merely," Rinkley said to her then cheerfully admitted he had no information that this might be so. It was a bit of whimsy, rather, proposed by him on behalf of their world.

If it came to pass that this so-called Mandela Effect was found to be real, it would be the funniest thing. In Rinkley's estimation. The world would stop

making sense utterly. At which point we would know that the progenitor of this crisis was blessed with a sense of humour. That He was a facile game player tempting us all to enjoy His games.

A maple leaf morphing into an oak leaf was nothing special in the phrenologist's estimation. Whereas the same Canadian symbol having become transmogrified into a European yew leaf would, in his view, be cause for serious alarm.

"This would stand as evidence of diabolical humour," he said. "But I think diabolical humour of a truly juvenile kind."

It simply wouldn't make sense, he said. It would instead provide evidence of the Creator's favoring of chaos. Which went against the prevailing opinion of Him as munificent and wise.

No, it wouldn't be a cause for levity if one of Helen's maple leaves had turned into the fractalized green daggers of the southern European yew. Even the Mandela Effect should have parameters. Every possibility should not be allowed to bleed into one another simultaneously.

"I think you should monitor the situation as ably as you can and get back to me forthwith," Dr. Rinkley told her, not revealing where he was about to go. This secretive nature befitted one who had an aura of un-reality to him. He had entered on a whim and would leave on a whim (if not his whim then somebody else's). Perhaps it would rain again, and the worms would reappear. But this would not be a cause so much as a stage direction. P.S. Rinkley was incapable of honesty. Which meant that he lacked a true motivation for his behavior. He admitted no distress that this was so. He didn't run deep enough to feel things powerfully. He was the perfect man for the present age. A twenty-first century Adam, you might say. His innocence had long since curdled into

nihilism. There would be no fall from Grace for him or his like whatsoever. He was pre-Fallen.

What he wanted or, rather, said he wanted from both Helen and Herbert was an introduction to the dead of Delacorte. It didn't matter whether their status as officially dead had been confirmed through official channels. The dead had risen and were increasingly indistinguishable from the living. Nobody walked around with their death certificate pinned to their lapel like it was a war medal. Nowadays death was a state of mind more so than a state of being.

Of late, the sun had cracked down its center like a hatching egg. Serpents the size of planetoids were flying out of it every now and again as if to challenge conventional notions of normalcy past the point of reason.

Upon first introducing himself in the flowery way of eighteenth-century fops, Dr. Rinkley had asked to have access to Fuzzy alone so he might examine him "in his natural habitat."

"Madam, you see before you an expert in phrenology, in the alchemy of the Egyptians, in metaphysics, telegony, vitalism, and the plum pudding model," Dr. Rinkley declared. Quickly as he might he removed a silk handkerchief from his vest and began to dab at his forehead in a delicate enough way to make it seem that he was sensitized to his own touch. He wasn't sweating at all at the moment, nor did he seem capable of sweating, owing to the desiccated texture of his skin which seemed like so many compressed layers of chalk formed into a thinnish covering over the muscle. Here was an affect, rather, produced for a distressed woman perhaps to charm or even to impress. He wanted something from her absolutely and he had calculated that this was the quickest way to get it. But nobody in this age of rapid

information dissemination could look at such a man and not declare him passingly strange. Surely the art of the confidence man was to instil trust in a victim rather than alienated bemusement. Rinkley was in no way trying to pass himself off as just another freelancing scientist of the sort who had beaten a path to Delacorte in the Returnees' early days. He offered nothing in the way of a comforting theory to Helen during his pitch. He intimated merely that he knew things. He wanted to see the sights of the earth's demise to satisfy some bet he made with himself. He had perfect square teeth that were completely obscured from view only on the occasions that he smiled. He had emerged from a nightmare and stayed. Not many in the Delacorte of 2018 found this strange at all, unfortunately for them.

Rinkley's expertise in phrenology had been employed straight off when meeting Fuzzy in the same corner of his bedroom that he had migrated into months ago. This was just after the silent prayers had started so many months back. Perhaps Fuzzy found it more convenient to remain there. To shuffle over from bed every now and again easefully. With him, everything became a routine. Nobody seemed to notice anymore what Fuzzy's mannerisms were. This was since the FBI contact had simply stopped requesting that he be provided with daily updates. Chief Hung didn't come around much anymore with his notepad.

Helen Dice couldn't bear to watch him. The thought had come to her one day that Fuzzy's return was a curse, not a blessing. From then on she left the bedroom window unlocked, hoping that one day her son might be inspired to crawl out of it. Something else beside the bedroom might call to him eventually. His return was mysterious, so why not his exit? She felt empowered somehow to

fantasize about this. Really it was her single source of inspiration. She thought he had no desire to remain here any longer than necessary. If only because the birds, Herbert's solitary source of sustenance, were outside. The creature comforts of the modern home were devoid of appeal for him presently. She thought deep down his second abandoning of the world was inevitable. She assumed it a secret wish that one day might be fulfilled.

The first thing Dr. Rinkley did to Fuzzy when encountering him in his bedroom was situate him in the room's plastic chair. He then began to press down on his shoulders with increasing force.

"It's an affective drive disorder seemingly," he said into his Bluetooth-enabled voice recorder that pathologists used to record their notes in the midst of an autopsy. "Subject A exhibits no duress or even a will of his own," he said. "I'm looking into his eyes in search of reflexion," he said. "But there's nothing there. The light of recognition is nothing more than the damp dripping into a mud puddle from a secondary source. The cerebral cortex is not engaged."

Rinkley approached Fuzzy from behind and, as was his training at the European Phrenological Society in Edinburgh, began to palpate each of the twenty-seven known neuro-sympathetic zones searching for enlargements or indentations.

"Application of fingers two and three on Concentrativeness," he spoke into the voice-corder, surmising his gentle probing with both hands on a small area just above Fuzzy's right eye socket. "Here, we discover a small indentation indicating some form of imbecility," he said, "whether latent or demonstrated, to be present. The ridge that is formed as a result leads straight to Love of Approbation, down to Wonder," he said. "You would

show Herbert an image of the Archangel Michael and he would likely wish to stick his tongue into the creature's rectum. If only to sample the fecund flavor of God that resides within. No, a day laborer at best, he, and not an artisan," the doctor said of the subject in question. "He was bound for piecemeal work in a factory if there are any of these structures still left in the area. Please do not be so quick to understand me," he said. "I am not casting aspersions unduly on those who cannot defend themselves. Let it be known. The subject is awake and aware as he might be. If he wishes to gainsay me, he could do so at any time," he said. "But to judge by his silence, he seems in agreement with every word I say."

Silence was not taken as assent in any humane culture. Nor was it taken as consent in political systems with fully developed encodings of individual rights. Pointing this out to Dr. Rinkley, Helen Dice asked for whose ears the medical recording was intended. She wanted to know after Rinkley's angle. She wanted to know why his tone had suddenly turned insulting towards her son when he had given him no cause to be insulted.

There were so many assholes wandering about town nowadays that Helen felt she had the right to ask. Well, not just the right, but the duty. As far as she knew, she was the only human in the world on Fuzzy's side. That is, she was the only one who wanted the best for him, at least most of the time, independent of personal gain.

The pause function on the voice recorder was activated by the person nearest to the microphone saying "pause."

"I am a scientist of a passingly strange type," Dr. Rinkley said as his palpating continued. From a distance, his twisting fingers reminded Helen of some of the more aggressive worms living on

Fuzzy's skin on day one of his return when fleeing from extra-cutaneous predation. "I have always reached a conclusion in advance of the facts," he said to her loudly as if he was overjoyed at the outcome. "Facts to me are mere slaves to the philosophy they're meant to engender," he said. "They are to me simple rationalizations, talking points, to support that which is already known. As that which is not known likely has no relevance to ordinary modes of human conduct. Now, I am merely interested in the corridor of reality where normal people move. So, the science is necessary to explain to them why they are being treated in a given way. If only as a rhetorical strategy, there needs to be something unimpeachable to turn to as a rationale. In a way, I'm the most honest purveyor of the intellectual disciplines you will meet. As I readily admit the truth of my intentions."

He pointed to Fuzzy Dice before continuing.

"This boy here is interesting to me merely as a specimen. He has an ability to provide evidence of an on-going fraud. For this contention I only need a limited set of facts. What I am hypothesizing may or may not actually be the case. But I am not the sort of scientist bound by facts in service of promoting a good idea.

"Facts," Rinkley said, "are rather shallow creatures. They are vulgar things in my estimation, soulless pack animals that drive the plough of human progress. A true illuminatus shouldn't be either overly impressed or slightly offended by me abandoning facts while in the shadow of the slaughterhouse. The sort of observations I'm in the process of making about this lad are obvious when relieved of the burden of facts. The subject is above everything a will-less agglutination of meaningless configurations. We are all such agglutinations, actually. But it is the phrenologist's prerogative to

diagnose one cavity at a time merely. The disease a subject evinces will be as self-evident as it is incurable after such an examination. Thus, one should not be full of pity concerning this subject's inevitable demise. As one could easily find oneself the subject of the same inspection at a future date. You are no more fortunate than him," he told her. "You will find no comfort in temporary survival."

Even for these End Times, such talk was a bit forward. And as Rinkley had introduced himself to Helen minutes before, it was strange that she hadn't thrown him out on his fat ass after he had issued an obtuse threat. She was not a timid person ordinarily. And over the past year she had grown increasingly ornery as it became obvious that help for her and her son was not forthcoming. She was fearful of Dr. Rinkley regardless, because of the seeming forthrightness of his mendacity. He might well be the serial killer of so many American urban legends. He seemed willing to help but also was possessed of a certain unprofessional quality. She had never heard of phrenology, for example, or the plum pudding model. Rinkley was superficially friendly and comforting in the way that all serial killers might be imagined prior to trapping their prey. He had vowed not to hurt Fuzzy, for example, in what he qualified as "any above-board way." At that point, all the Hebrew *K*s were hidden from view. He might have been, for all she knew, a narc. She had slipped back into her meth habit after Chief Hung had left her life. She assumed Hung her last hope and, once he vanished, she had a void to fill. Maybe Rinkley was a narc. If so, he was a man to be feared. She would have assumed by now that people would be left to their own devices. She never understood the mania for drug control. He seemed like somebody a narc would think of as

camouflaged. He seemed somebody who was trying to be hip but was entirely weird instead.

Despite constant prompting to the contrary, Rinkley could offer neither diagnosis nor prognosis about Fuzzy Dice's condition.

"There was an enormous egg somewhere in the universe," he told Helen on the occasion of their attic sojourn, "and it hatched."

She asked him to sum up what was going on, what had occurred and would likely keep on occurring until some sort of equity was reached.

Dr. Rinkley was supremely isolated from the need to make definite statements about things. So, he surmised the world as he believed Helen had perceived it. He told her there was a serpent-like creature enormous as galaxy clusters who was devouring the universe from within. He told her this creature was inured to the fate of life on earth. Or even contemptuous of it. He told her the egg had hatched and everything was doomed. He spoke about such things only as a way of not having to speak about them again. Nothing much in the way of truth even of a metaphorical variety was generated by his words. They were just a conversation stopper. To Rinkley, the utterance's value resided in its brevity. Beyond the single sentence there was little need for elaboration. It was banal and mysterious at the same time. Enough merely to forestall further conversation about its stated subject, the end of the world (seemingly). The sun, for example, had seen better days of late. But nobody with any serious knowledge of helio-physics could say why this was.

In Dr. Rinkley's view, it was deeply important for ordinary men to live in the moment. If only because all other speculation about past and future led men to false conclusions. For him, the animal

consciousness of the senses and short-term memory were the only real conduits for truth.

His phrenological measurements on Herbert were long since concluded. He had a notion to sneak in with a saw and cut off Helen's dosing head. Rinkley would place the head in his lap while rocking in the old chair in the living room. He would pin the eyes open somehow and stare deep into the pupils for long periods in search of an emotional connection. He wanted to know what all the literature of love was about. He wanted to know exactly to what it referred.

This inquiry could take the shape of a quasi-scientific experiment where his own responses could be monitored. He would need a jar of formaldehyde from somewhere, if only to forestall the flesh rot that would invariably fudge the results. Because when flesh rot started, love flew out the window. Within the object of our love, we imagine the Eternal dwelling. Even voracious flies were disgusted at their own death attraction likely. They were constantly looking to evolve into creatures that would choose life over death. They wanted to live as normal banana slugs perhaps. Or maybe even as human beings.

Dr. Rinkley thought his views would eventually hold great attraction for others. Simply because others were suddenly so afraid of so much.

"When it is time to die, make sure to huff the open exhaust for twenty minutes fully, prior to the smoking of the drug," he said to Helen on their occasion of smoking a fentanyl patch in her tiny kitchen. By this point, the photo album with its span of false memory was on the floor, having been upturned from the counter in a stoned stupor by one of them. Her collection of dead leaves once sealed in plastic was likewise on the floor, in the midst of

being crumbled beyond recognition by one of Rinkley's machinist boots.

He had no time for such winsome experiments as the comparing of maple leaves to their former oaken states. To him, it was an irrelevant comparison to make. As far as he was concerned, all history, which was the objective accounting of the past, should be allowed to die an ignominious death. Let myth, which was a projection of present-day anxiety onto the past, arise! The end of civilization came about at exactly that moment when a critical mass of humans accepted myth as their preferred explanation and abandoned history.

It was dying, history, in early twenty-first century America. In Dr. Rinkley's view, it was high time it died. The mass of men was not cut out for a life of probity and reason. God or gods needed to be resurrected and physically placed on their restored thrones. Scientific inquiry was history's enabler, so it too needed to be discouraged. The mass of men needed to be encouraged to accept merely *What Was*. *What Was*, was whatever Prevailing Authority dictated it be. He thought miracles were required as a matter of course. The animal consciousness nascent in man, replete with fear and wonder, should replace skeptical inquiry utterly. He thought people were already terrified enough to be prompted to stamp out skeptical inquiry altogether. The priestly narrative that must be shaped over the next few decades was that animals were preferable to men. Public blood sacrifices on a mass scale must be undertaken to hammer the point home. Let the lovers of history, those promulgators of the notion that there was a truth above blood and dreams, become a hidden cult just like Christianity was at the advent of the first millennium. This cult would eventually die out. Or attempt its own revolution, thus giving history a temporary respite. Its

revolution would ultimately fail, as the universe tended toward forgetfulness rather than memory. Which was to say, only in the consciousness of animals was there escape. Men would never really survive if they assumed themselves as superior beings. They couldn't survive as supermen. They were too at the whim of their own bodies. The way to happiness led down the evolutionary stairwell, not up.

Of this, Rinkley was too convinced to even consider that another way might be possible. He was not a religious man and had no intention of appealing to the better angels of another person's nature when it came time to articulating the way forward. Helen Dice, in particular, seemed a prime candidate for pig consciousness, if only to judge by the one meeting Rinkley had with her. He was in the midst of providing her advice of how to kill herself with her current supply of meth. According to him, the secret was to smoke as much rock as one could prior to turning a carbon monoxide flow on. She would need to rig up a gas mask type of contraption and attach it to the tailpipe of her truck. She would need to get as much of the CO into her lungs while still being able to operate her glass pipe ably.

Probably her addiction had rendered such actions autonomic. Helen Dice could literally smoke while unconscious. It was a supreme advantage when trying to get your heart to stop because of drugs. It was Rinkley's understanding that it was carbon monoxide in this instance that had more to do with stopping the heart. He believed the methamphetamine worked merely as a type of catalyst to hasten the process.

Of this process, as with so much else, Rinkley was supremely confident. However, he didn't know offhand why the process had existed. It registered with him as so much undiscovered folklore of the

Midwest. It may well have been good advice, but it seemed like folklore, nonetheless.

"You slobber when you smoke," he said to Helen while watching her get high from a growing distance in the kitchen. Eventually he let himself out the back door. He had no intention of casting aspersions at the populace of Delacorte. Over time, he had grown to consider the citizens there his flock. When he spoke of them, his voice was filled with wonder. He didn't understand how it worked with others. He wouldn't be around long enough to discover how.

Presently, his phrenological measurements were completed, tucked away in the pocket notebook he used to store such data. Now he was onto something else altogether. He spoke to Helen merely to hide his contempt for her. He wanted to have her believe that he was actually a caring person. He wanted to pretend that he saw her manias as something that might engender compassion in an ordinary person. It was not so with him. He thought it was not out of the range of possibility that he would eventually have to pretend to recognize her humanity. That would be too much for him, but he would burn that bridge when he came to it.

When Helen Dice was in her death throes due to the meth/exhaust fumes combo that Dr. Rinkley had recommended, she would detect a pure white light in the center of her frame of reference pouring down from a hole in the otherwise crepuscular nothingness.

"That light is to be avoided at all costs," Rinkley told her, not deigning to say why. Within the glow, it might be supposed, resided the lone means of a soul's destruction. Hard to say why it would be this volcanically active, but this was what Rinkley believed. God wanted His children to transcend. If

not, why would this opportunity have been presented to so many in the first place?

The cries of lowly bugs, of dung-dwelling beetles when crushed under heel by nameless grandees, of half-majestic katydids with their forearms pulled off them by these self-same colonels occupied Dr. Rinkley's attention as he traversed the town of Delacorte, Iowa's soggy length on foot. He wanted to take in the sights such as they were one more time. Something transient and foul had entered into the local environment. As with so many others, Rinkley assumed this was the end. Well, not the *final* end. But at the very least a giant caesura before the darkness descended for good. Something might exist, but it would be profoundly different than what had come before. He wasn't nostalgic for the place (hardly), less so concerned about a lacuna opening within his memory. Somebody, some-thing might ask him in some hideous new language eons on what it all had been like. At which point he would have been bereft of a definitive answer. This town was stingy with its glamour. Glamour needed to be teased out of Delacorte's corpus in a methodical way. Much of it needed to be imagined wholesale. As an addendum to the glamor that was actually there, imaginary creatures required birthing. A maker of charming wooden cuckoo clocks, for example, had maintained a museum in Delacorte. And then there was all the Grant Wood kitsch to behold.

A gallery to the painter of *American Gothic* recently had been erected by Delacorte's city fathers (who likely couldn't distinguish one of Wood's rustic paintings from the next).

Encountering the chief of police, G.I. Hung, at one of these faux local points of interest, Dr. Rinkley was at pains to reassure the officer that there was nothing being missed by the constable's inability to

appreciate the Picasso of the Midwest's subtle genius.

"Art itself is fraudulent as the mythical chimera," Rinkley told Chief Hung with the air of somebody with deep knowledge of the subject. "Inspiration is a creature many have conceptualized but few can describe with any sort of detail," he said. "The *American Gothic* of so much discussion," he said to G.I., who may or may not have heard of the painting, "was just a one off on the artist's part, a painterly mistake devoid of any real depth of meaning. The couple portrayed therein is not an attractive couple. And if you look closer, you can see that they are not man and wife but brother and sister. Yes, friend, in late middle age! Cohabitating under the same wooden roof! Brother and sister! The incestuous relationship portrayed is as obvious as your slant eyes and yellow skin, officer. In this light the artist's intentions are revealed as merely perverse. The luridness of the image is itself a disqualification from serious study of it. But out here, one supposes, the cultural soil is fallow. Hicks need a defining image and here it is. You shouldn't under any circumstances think of it as art."

Indeed, the only art Rinkley saw fit to admire with any degree of solicitude were those illegal Chinese reproductions of Andy Warhol's reproductions of various car crashes, race riots, and pretty blue electric chairs originating from the photography of the *New York Sun* during the 1960s. In these images alone did P.S. discover evidence of a truly dispassionate gaze being cast at human affairs. There was no evidence of inspiration in them except for the banal inspiration that violence created through a fascinating spectacle that was pleasurable to behold (if one was distant enough from it). The paintings gave one the impression that they were freeze frames of the God Consciousness

staring down at a horrible scene. They were devoid of empathy for their subjects. As well as any arty touch that would indicate that the subjects were of human origin. Merely, they were a piece of aloof reportage promoting the purely aesthetic qualities of death and disaster—one of the car crash victims' shoulders had been dislocated to such a degree as to annihilate a notion of the left side of her body being distinct from the right side. They had the profound effect of dehumanizing their subjects even as they dehumanized the viewer. Here, painter and spectator were locked into a pact of moral suicide. They would neither of them survive the witnessing of such "art" intact. Something lesser, more objective would emerge to replace the nineteenth century's mellifluous soul. And here at the advent of the New Age this transformation was, in P.S. Rinkley's view, essential. He liked the Chinese knockoffs of the Warhol knockoffs simply because the more coldly distant the pictures were for him (at least philosophically speaking) the better. Online firms from China dealt in such cheesy reproductions in an illicit way and these reproductions Dr. Rinkley prized the most. They were as dead as the dead eyes of some of the victims in the captures. They had navigated the great transition from emotional language into machine language. They were pure in a way Grant Wood and his incestuous images could never be. Nothing was celebrated within their frames, nothing was critiqued. In them was a bug's eye view of the world. Which was Dr. Rinkley's view. But the Warhol Museum was somewhere in Pittsburgh, far away from Iowa's flat affect. P.S. thought Chief Hung should go online and view the Chinese reproductions for himself. And maybe even buy. He believed he was wasting his time here otherwise.

“On the other hand, friend,” Rinkley said, “What the hell else is there to look at out here?”

Indeed, long before Fuzzy Dice had scratched his way out of his coffin, Delacorte had been empty of a tourist scene. Out here there was want of anything but the odd flood to bear witness to with any intensity.

“I never saw what others saw when they spoke of Beautiful Iowa,” Hung said to Dr. Rinkley whose acquaintance he had made only through the auspices of Helen Dice. G.I. thought, *here is another rootless freak here to see the freak show*. Then he forgot about Rinkley. Delacorte by 2018 had taken on the aura of a type of negated Fatima. The pilgrimage began and ended within the village’s two block downtown. Pilgrims wanted to see the exact grave that Fuzzy had emerged from years before, but the whole cemetery had been cordoned off by the EPA. On the other side of the cordon was an undifferentiated hole removed of physical marker. The bodies had been incinerated at the behest of the Trump Administration and the ashes preserved in a clean room somewhere in the CDC for further study. If they wanted to jump the fence and look for themselves, they could. But there was nothing to see. Chief Hung told the pilgrims this in no uncertain terms whenever they were directed toward his office. He told them: *you’re wasting your time here. Go home*. He told them that the Apocalypse was a global event. There was no need to jump the gun with any of this. He told them there was no need for them to seek oblivion as it likely would come to them easefully and inevitably in the manner of a sunrise.

The Grant Wood reproduction they were both standing in front of now was titled *Woman with a Plant*. It depicted a woman with a plant. Dr. Rinkley thought Grant Wood was incapable of metaphor. He

thought he said what he meant always. This was the way of all morons. He was a heartland visionary of the tried and true.

G.I. Hung had a frog in his throat that he was forced to clear before he responded.

"I think they're relocating the museum to Chicago come 2019," he said looking around the tiny alcove at what passed in these parts for a "museum." Admittedly, when it happened, nobody but a few schoolteachers who had scheduled this trip out here to coincide with their cigarette breaks would be especially upset. Even people not schooled in art history could sense something lacking in the art of Grant Wood. He was a sentimentalist of the old stripe that even pre-Returnee America could not hang with. Modern men wanted to be machines. This was in the same manner as Andy Warhol's repetitive god. They knew the perils of being pink and squishy. There was nothing elevating about the human state even slightly and they knew this.

Eventually, which was to say quite soon, there would be no museum in the world that would be open. So maybe it could be pointed out that art of every variety was now passé. Already Hung had felt uncomfortable with the subject at hand. It felt too airy-fairy with him. It felt like something entirely beside the point, even though he was the one who had brought it up.

"What's the latest condition anyway?" Hung, who only recently had left his wife of twenty-seven years, said to P.S. after the doctor had communicated from whose house he had just emerged. Hung asked quietly in the hopes that Rinkley wouldn't provide any sort of detailed report to him. He had hoped it was understood that any official police involvement in the case was over. He was asking as a courtesy to Helen above anything else. He thought he owed her that much concern.

He thought at the very least before the end came, he would say goodbye.

The sun's disease, he and others like him had assumed, would be the death of them all. Not one astrophysicist could put into words the malady that it was suffering from. It was either too hot or too cold, running out of fuel or oversaturated with a too ready supply of it to keep its equilibrium for long. They hypothesized a giant hole three hundred times the earth's diameter forming in its exterior. But to an impartial observer it appeared as monsters emerging from the sun with regularity. No scientist had a ready explanation for what would happen next. Probably this was the end. But few of these Poindexters agreed about what it meant to be at an end.

People, G.I. Hung most significantly, were exhausted by the span of events having taken place over the past thirty months. They wanted this all to be over. They had gotten over their fear of death to a degree merely by being so heavily exposed to it over for so long. They were like war veterans with the famous hundred-foot stare prominently on display. To them, dying was a simple change which it would be foolish to protest over too loudly. They were resigned to their fate. They all felt a little bit dead inside already.

On more than one occasion, Hung had entertained the thought of forcibly shoving Fuzzy back into the hole from which he had dug himself out of to reverse the bad juju in the world.

"We had a posse formed to do just this, me and about seven of the local yokels around here," Hung said to Rinkley, recalling that many of the yokels were Fuzzy's former friends. "One of them had experience in fabrication. He had welded this metal casket with six-inch bolts on it. We thought we would just throw him in and seal it and see what

would occur as a result," G.I. said. We talked about it as an experiment," he said. "Maybe nothing would happen as a result. We thought we were safe as far as the law went. We had the death certificate on file," he said. "But as an officer of the law I couldn't rightly move forward with what we were planning. No, it wasn't conscience gnawing at me so much as me chickening out at the last moment. Plus, I had developed a rapport with the victim, the grieving mother, whatever you want to call Helen. Plus, I kept on dreaming that he was lying in there forever trying to get out."

It was certainly a smart play letting well enough alone. This was according to Dr. P.S. Rinkley. As without Fuzzy Dice, without this first Returnee, perhaps none of the others would have followed suit.

"And then where would I be regarding my plethora of experiments and speculations?" he declared in a foppish way. This bit of facetiousness indicated to Chief Hung that Rinkley was admitting that his "science" such as it was would have proceeded apace regardless. Which also indicated perhaps he believed these strange events inevitable, even though they might have assumed a more attenuated form in some parallel universe where events proceeded differently. In any event his cranial callipers would be in full use constantly.

Rinkley felt the need to protest the notion that there was any sort of randomness to his continued presence in Delacorte. He took pride in his own significance. Even though he was loath to admit the details of this significance to any local cop who should ask him, if only out of due diligence.

They couldn't stop if they wanted to. After all, Hung's promotion to Chief of Police would never have been processed absent of FBI attention paid to the Delacorte PD's rank incompetence at the top.

Merely, Hung had been the last man standing after the federal-initiated purge had taken place within the department. Once promoted, he had been given a twenty thousand dollar a year bump in pay. Now he was a local celebrity. In his way of thinking there was no vacillating required regarding the dead rising. It was a good thing that had occurred. It was something that must be celebrated from all quarters. This included the Returnees. From their perspective, the only alternative to being Returned was being dead. As troubled as they seemed while re-animated, the alternative was likely worse.

No normal person knew what the experience of death was like. Couldn't have been roses and lollipops all the while you'd have to say, if only to judge by the mental state of those who had come back from it. The Returned were fucked-up beyond recognition absolutely. Which seemed to indicate some form of continuous trauma experienced while lying in the ground.

Rinkley thought this was a boon to so many that when it ended—and it would end, he was sure, within a relatively short time—there would be a great occasion for mourning. He thought eventually a new reality would set in for all concerned. Nobody had yet voiced an opinion about how wonderful this all was. It was all dread and trepidation to judge by the mirror the media purported to hold up to public opinion. They needed to look on the bright side of this affair. They needed to see what a great advancement Apocalypse was not only for their interests but for the world in general.

It put the Midwest on the map again, if only for a while.

"What're you gonna do when it is all over?" Rinkley said, thereby implying that he or other people on the planet had a choice.

Hung was not his usually skeptical self while absorbing the information Rinkley had offered.

“Maybe take a trip back to Vietnam,” he told the doctor who seemed to be listening intently for some reason. “Off to the Annamese Mountains where my village is from. I need to go there before I die,” he said. “My dreams are telling me I need to go there. But who knows if it’ll be there by the time I get ready? Maybe the earth will be cut in two by then and the plane will simply fall off into outer space before I get there. Something like that, maybe subtler. But I didn’t think until you mentioned it that I ever would be able to get there one way or the other.”

In fact, like so many others, Hung had contracted a lesser case of whatever ailment the Returnees had suffered from.

“I just been walking around shaking in my boots, waiting for something to occur. Waiting for the earth to open up,” he said to Rinkley and looked down at the stretch of broken and damp pavement that was present before them on either side of the street. As they talked, they had taken gradual steps outside the tiny gallery and into Delacorte’s downtown. Nobody was on the street as usual and the few cars that had been parked in the metered spaces just off Main Street wore their span of yellow tickets off their driver’s side windshield proudly as if they were exotic Indian headpieces. Their owners had abandoned the cars long ago whether out of fear or indifference. The tow company whose job it was to haul them away was remiss in their duties, perhaps out of the same apathy that had caused them to be stranded.

If, at the advent of 2019, nothing demonstrably apocalyptic had occurred, certain people, most notably G.I. Hung, would be wearing egg on his face. He still couldn’t imagine the end of the world

taking place between now and then. But he had been conditioned for so many months to expect it. So much so that it would have been supremely strange if mere normalcy had taken hold. The hole in the sun, for example, according to various astrophysicists, was perfectly explainable through an appeal to a shifting magnetic field. But such explanations in the face of so much evidence of the supernatural was hardly convincing. The universe didn't seem to function in a haphazard way where so many coincidences piled on top of each other occurred randomly. Hung thought it utterly mind-boggling that this might be so. He thought it rather offensive as well that this might be so, given that it implied that all human striving was born of chaos, not grandeur, and was ludicrous at its root.

These were deeply negative thoughts, and he didn't know how such a chipper person such as Dr. Rinkley might take them if not expressed with the delicacy that the moment called for.

"We hope for the best but prepare for the worst," Hung told Rinkley, shifting into his chief of police persona before he spoke his mind. In fact, he had rendered this sentiment backwards. Hours on end Hung and so many townsfolk like him had taken to staring up at the dirty sun waiting for it to blink off. He was convinced that when it had, a great cheer would rise through town of the sort that one was used to only during sporting events. In a slow-motion fashion, the atmosphere would cool. A bit of disorientation would ensue as the earth, newly released from the sun's gravity, would assume a constantly shifting axis as it careened outwards toward Jupiter.

Once such vertigo was experienced on a mass level, Hung would likely have been dead by his own hand. Likely he had reasoned that the fear and

terror associated with the event was something to be avoided at all costs.

“I’ve cleared my calendar of all social obligation,” Hung said to Deputy Director Martling when seeing him there on the highway’s median several hours later with a rifle at quarter arms. “Well, if it happens, it happens,” he said to him, not really believing with any sincerity that it wouldn’t happen. “But I think it’s the smart play that every American should perform,” he said. “I think it’s something we all have thought about or should think about before now. Where we are going to be and how we are going to do it. Of course, I have a right to carry around a concealed weapon as a peace officer. But if you don’t have a gun or are squeamish about it in some way, it’s good to make a contingency plan. I think a lawyer should be visited. Once there, you should make a pact about those you live with. Regarding how it’s done. I mean if the sun is dying and they give us warning. You go into your garage and turn the car on and don’t forget to soak the rags you stuff under the garage door first. The government should put such details online for people to think over in advance. Lawyers tell you to make a living will only. But I don’t think that’s half as good as it should be. I think you need to make a death pact with yourself. For example, I’m building a table mechanism that fires a pistol with a chain. You keep your head steady this way and don’t allow for slippage. I got the plans for it on the internet and, really, it’s the best way to go. Because I think sitting in your garage waiting for the fumes to take you is a pretty horrifying way out. If you ask me. It’s just my opinion but it’s a pretty horrifying way out. This too needs to be communicated to so many. There’s so much superstition surrounding the idea of being granted relief for some reason. I don’t think it’s right

personally. I think the government needs to live up to the promises it made just after all this started."

The promise he was referring to specifically was the pledge by the Trump Administration to encourage "responsible Americans to do what they think is best" regarding their own future past 2018. There had been some vague talk, for example, of making Phenobarbital an over-the-counter drug. Just like Sudafed tablets, you could buy them in limited amounts of ten tablets to a pack if you wanted to use them for prescribed purposes or twenty tablets if you wanted to exercise your God-given right (at least according to the president) to shuffle off this mortal coil at a time and place of your choosing. Oh, the sun blinking out and the earth being flung from the galaxy entirely (at least according to one prominent astrophysicist) was a fate too scary for many to contemplate, let alone live through (if only for the week or two it had taken for complete human extinction to take place). It was rumored that all the hoi-polloi were scheduled to relocate to a salt mine in the Utah desert where even now a nuclear power plant was being installed with enough fuel for a two-hundred year run. Chief Hung thought it was as unfair as anything he had ever heard. He thought a posse should form and take a torch to the whole structure before it was too late. If it ever existed.

When the sun vanished with or without an attendant explosion, Director Martling assumed everybody was fucked in every way imaginable. So why prolong the pain, why draw it out over several years? He didn't understand the need for self-preservation at all costs. He didn't understand it even slightly and would, if an invitation into the Utah salt mine had been extended, decline to RSVP and wait for the bitter end in Washington, drunk and alone.

“I mean, you’d have to be fucking crazy to do anything else but this.”

Some men would rather live for several years under the ground than sleep forever like so many long-forgotten Gods of nameless civilizations. It made no sense, even at a practical level. It was so much easier, at least in the present *mise-en-scène*, to die rather than live. The horrors that awaited the planet in a dead solar system were possibly too immediate to describe, let alone endure. One predictive model had the planet crashing into Jupiter in an on-going fireball. The oceans would freeze and crack the earth below it like so much dead skin raising blood as it splintered. And towards the end bedraggled men would eat shit efficaciously to stay alive. Some men would be envious of the quality of shit one man ate in comparison to another. The arrival of death would be welcomed for all concerned. As would any form of human happiness aimed at spiritual fulfillment (that would in turn enable the courage to commit suicide). But the hoi-polloi would do anything to remain alive a little while longer. They had perhaps far too great an opinion of themselves. They lacked the ego boundaries to separate the death of themselves from the death of reality itself.

Now look (and this was a message Big John Martling was willing to convey to every bird in the aviary who came his way): there was nothing to fear and everything to look forward to over the next few months as the inevitable transpired. As far as he was concerned, The End was preferrable to the *status quo ante*. If only because it was preferable to die as a member of an enormous group. This was as opposed to dying alone in a DC-area hospice of progressive liver failure.

“Haven’t passed a sober morning since the thing with the sun occurred—its sickness,” he told

Chief Hung and took aim with his rifle. An AR model it was, which, given the faunae of the highway median that included dozens of cockerels, your typical midwestern crows, and some groundhogs and mice, stood as the most massive weapons overkill since the build-up of nuclear weapons in the 1950s to maintain “peace.” He had bought the AR cheap from a farmer down the road who had been stockpiling such weapons ever since Fuzzy Dice’s return. He found himself bereft of an identifiable enemy to aim them at, so he put ‘em up for sale. The rifle was a semi-auto, gas powered, with an effective range of three hundred yards. Four hundred, if you happened to be sober while operating it. Even the paranoid farmer thought that using the AR for crows to be too much. “It gives us a bad name out here,” he told John with a real sense of hurt in his voice. “It gives the hunter the rep that he’s out for blood. When the opposite is true. It’s a weapon of defense as far as I’m concerned, the assault rifle. You use it on a man merely, or on whatever robotized thing the government uses against its local populous nowadays. Use it for crow just as you might use a hand grenade for fishing. I mean, what’s the goddamn fun of doing so? Where’s the fucking sport in emptying a jacket into the side of a one-pound animal from two hundred yards away? Where’s the glory in taking home a trophy that’s been cut to ribbons by three shells in a second?”

Indeed, John didn’t want the gun for hunting, not for birds certainly, and, surprisingly, not for zombies either.

“It’s unloaded so relax,” he told Hung after he had commented on the inappropriateness of attempting to blow away an eight-inch cockerel with an assault rifle. Wouldn’t be any goddamn meat left to roast. At first contact, the shell would have torn

the bird into nine pieces. No, nothing left afterwards. He'd be looking through the median swamp (for so it had become) for a particular breast or thigh for forty minutes just to discover it torn in thirds and inedible.

What Martling liked to do with the AR out here was provide passers-by the illusion that he was in the midst of a hunt. This was so they might give him an earful about the illicitness of the activity.

"Adds to their sense of disorientation, seeing me out here like this, as if the rule of law doesn't apply anymore," he told Chief Hung after showing him that the magazine cartridge was indeed empty. "No, I've got no sense of blood lust left," he said, "if I ever had any. In fact, it is my pleasure coming out here daily to commune with the birds. I think it's saved my sanity or at least delayed its loss for several months. I can stare at these creatures for hours without flinching. Everything they do is fascinating to me. I watch them turn their heads and fly away. I don't think they see the world quite like we do. I think they're wiser in a way than we are. I think they've got much to tell us if only we would listen to them."

John watched a crow circle a wooded grove just beyond the southbound lanes. Eventually it dove into a thicket in search of some mysterious prey.

"I was thinking about St. Francis of Assisi in that famous portrait of him listening to the nature all around him," Martling said to Hung whose mind, truth be told, was elsewhere. He had followed Dr. Rinkley all the way out here in his cruiser miles past the city limits. He wanted to let Rinkley know he had him in his thoughts. He didn't like all the apocalyptic talk emanating from Rinkley's piehole. Perhaps societal standards had slipped so badly Rinkley couldn't imagine anybody taking offense at it.

A decades-long law enforcement professional, Hung assumed malicious intent was hiding in Rinkley's observations. He assumed the doctor was a deeply strange example of the sort of anarchist who had happened into Delacorte around the Trump inauguration. This sort meant to do society harm. They saw all the free publicity available in the small town as further incentive to do so. Like Rinkley, they revelled in their strangeness as if the alienation from other people was objective evidence of good breeding. They had the makings of pipe bombs in the hybrids they rode in on and the smug replies to an officer's questions. As if they assumed themselves above the law and expected the law to conform to that opinion.

Rinkley had stopped five hundred yards up from where Martling stood with his AR. He was sitting on the muddy road shoulder Indian-style, not giving a damn about the stains that were left as a result. He seemed to have no business out here apart from leading the chief on. He smiled benignly at the chief as Hung's unmarked cruiser passed him at ten miles an hour. This smile was an acknowledgement that he believed himself in full control of the situation. He would not budge until the chief swung around to take another look at him. By then there would be little between them that needed to be discussed.

Rinkley would announce himself as somebody entirely detached from legal repercussions. He was in possession of some sort of secret knowledge. Or, at any rate, this was the impression he was trying to leave with Hung up until the bitter end.

John Martling knew of Rinkley's pedigree. But as with so many things concerning this case, he was devoid of the drive to do anything about it. Everybody's connected to circumstance, every lead was valued. John had taken to saying this to his latest attaché on the rare occasions they met. He

assumed the universe was conspiring against the American mode of governance. Therefore, potential perps were as ubiquitous as the spacetime in which they floated. The perps were full of mendacious qualities. If Chief Hung had qualified Rinkley as the devil, Martling would take his assessment as gospel and contract with an exorcist to go do something about it. He didn't care about mass extinction. This was the crucial insight needed to understand his attitude about many things. He was rooting for the bad guys. He was looking for an exit ramp daily. Ever since the California guru had been revealed as a phony, he had no serious suspect. This Rinkley had become the lead suspect by default. Humanity needed to see that there was no purpose in trying to resist the inevitable. The end should be welcomed, therefore. There were no two ways about it. He thought any man who had a bad word for Dr. Rinkley himself should be subjected to the highest scrutiny. Such invective was a profoundly misanthropic act. And nowadays there was so many of his fellow men who agreed with him.

In St. Francis' famous portrait, the one by Giotto, he was bent down in cumbersome robes feeding pigeons with cornmeal.

"I don't feed the birds. As I assume the world is theirs after a little while anyway," John said to G.I. "Soon enough they'll be feeding *us*," he said and put the AR down. "Small creatures like this might not survive any way. But you figure they have a better chance than us. If the sun goes cold rather than disappear, you figure they'll evolve into some creature that can handle the cold. Birds are the ancestors of dinosaurs, I'll have you know," John said. "Been around for a billion years. They'll outlive us surely. Which isn't much to brag on, given our present circumstances. But it's heartening to know something will."

Every so often Martling would take off his shoes and socks and wade into the marsh that separated him from many of the flocks. This was to see how close he could get without them taking off.

“I’ve gotten within five feet before one flinches. Then the rest follow their lead,” John said describing his path and the excruciating number of minutes it had taken to execute. “Well, it’s ingrained in their nature, in their internal wiring, I’m saying,” he told Hung. They will never let you close enough. Never. There are some species of birds, here tell, that will allow you to eat from their hand. Not these birds. I saw another St. Francis portrait where he was doing this exactly. Touching the wings. Maybe it was a kind of bird native only to Italy. It was a kind of bird whose name I do not know,” he said. “Around here in Buttfuck, Iowa, birds scatter as soon as you violate that five-foot barrier. Regardless of the species they scatter. It’s an American thing, I’m guessing (though I have no way to confirm this myself). Maybe a Midwestern thing, more specifically. All sort of creatures are nervous out here apparently, all of God’s creatures. Including us. We’ve all got some sort of low-level PTSD. Maybe something deeper than that,” he said then began a coughing jag so alarming that even Dr. Rinkley (who for all intents was illusory), and the dragon newly emerged from the imploding sun ninety-three million miles away took brief notice of the hacking. The coughing seemed for so many tyros the sound of a man near or at least on the glide path to death.

The coughing drove John to distraction. He was on his hands and knees on the marshy ground of the flooded median before Chief Hung deigned to help him to his feet. Because of the length of the coughing jag, he had become convinced that John was experiencing some symptom of an underlying condition. He believed that John should go to the

doctor if he hadn't already gone. Might have been emphysema or something even darker still. It didn't sound like the kind of cough that would go away by itself. There was a racking tonality to it like metal scraping over metal. His face was a true shade of purple by the time he made it into Hung's cruiser. Where his own car was, he didn't say. He was just crazy enough to have walked out here with the AR strapped over a shoulder. Let the cops stop him if they wanted. Hung thought John was disinterested enough in his job to ignore his fellow peace officers' exhortations. Maybe he took a cab out here and at the cabbie's insistence put the rifle in the trunk. And he used his FBI-issued credit card for the fare.

G.I. didn't know where John was staying so he began to drive south. He was hoping he would receive directions from him eventually.

"We're on the right track, I assume," he asked John before remembering the bottle of water he kept under the passenger seat just in case a perp in the back seat went crying about his civil rights and had to be doused with it through the cage that separated him or her from the driver.

Once they hit Cedar Lake, Chief Hung pulled off into the Holiday Inn parking lot. He parked and waited for directions from John.

"What're you doing here, anyway?" he asked. As far as Hung knew, the FBI had divorced itself from the investigation. Mike Kay's death had snuffed out any impetus to go forward. Approaching 2019, President Trump was a foundering victim of his own brashness. Every now and then a news crew would venture up the highway to Delacorte and request access into the town's famous cemetery. G.I. never returned their calls. He thought they were beyond reclaiming, these media hacks. He thought they were the ones in need of killing off, not the rest of humanity. They had no news to report. They had,

rather, so many idiotic theories. They had theories of Russian election interference and voting booth software glitches. Trump, they claimed, never was elected. Facebook had helped elect him and the rest was CIA malfeasance. Or malfeasance on the part of the Mossad.

These theories had been promulgated by the media to serve their corporate masters. The truth didn't matter to them, so the truth was ignored. Merely, they needed an establishing shot of Zombie Ground Zero in Delacorte for their conspiracy-minded reports. They needed the local constable's cooperation to get past the EPA's restraining wall without fear of government reprisal.

Hung knew that John Martling hated the Hawkeye State and was at pains not to return here. Thus, his presence signalled that something was up.

Eventually he told Hung that he had come back only to see the highway aviary once last time prior to shuffling off this mortal coil.

"Has nothing to do with the sun's spatiotemporal reordering," he said using the technical term, the term that the media constantly used to make it seem that the expert class was still in control.

As they migrated toward the Holiday Inn's lone elevator, Martling grew expansive.

"Because of all the booze I've swilled over the years the cirrhosis in me is advanced," he said. "Actually, I've known I've had it for years. But I've been too chicken to get it checked out in depth. They want me on a transplant list. I've told them I've got bigger fish to fry. They want me in a hospital for some reason, but I've told them balls to that too. I want to live like St. Francis of Assisi, if only for the few months I've got left. Need to hear the voice of God in every bird chirp. I've got ideas for myself that go way beyond that moment of

ecstasy. I want to be buried in that highway median," he said to G.I., "just where the birds bathe."

He told Chief Hung he considered him his friend. He believed they shared a similar viewpoint about so many things.

"I want you to be the executor of my will," he told G.I. "Don't give a damn whether you're up to it, I want it. You owe me certainly for all that all I've done for you," he said.

"Cremate me and scatter my ashes in the mud puddle where I just fell."

Chief Hung thought: but why in this highway median in particular?

Upon further conversation, he would learn that John prized the strip of land only because it was so ordinary. He saw it as the first strip of America being reclaimed by nature. Eventually nature would reclaim the rest, but this was the first part. The median was outside of America presently. Given time, the strip would radiate outward to first capture the entirety of the Midwest, then all of America prior to reclaiming the world. It was holy ground, therefore. In the great war of nature versus mankind, Director Martling had long ago taken the side of nature. This area of Iowa with its empty warehouses, half-occupied malls and rusting infrastructure was ripe for the intercession of nature. America had long ago abandoned the Midwest and left it to the birds. He thought this was a great idea. He thought it an unintentional experiment that he was eager to be a part of. He wanted his bodily remains to be scattered on the median and used as nutrient for the hastening of this victory of nature. Eventually everything would return to normal as he saw it, everything would return to the condition of what once was. And humanity's brief dominion would end. This was what

he saw in the marshy strip of highway median in Iowa.

It took the soul of a poet really to imagine such change and John was marginally surprised at his abilities in this regard. Over the course of his long career in law enforcement, he had inured himself to literature's charms. He assumed this newfound sensitivity had something to do with his rotting liver. According to his hepatologist, the scarring present inside his liver's quadrate lobe released all sort of amino acids into the bloodstream. This caused mood swings and even holy visions. He should consider himself lucky that he was still functional before the jaundice set in and he was bedridden for good. If cirrhosis hadn't been present, his death would have held no meaning. Simply it would be one event amongst billions, trillions even up until the snuffing out of life on earth. The Midwest, however, had been dying in fits and starts for decades. John had come to feel deeply at home here even as he grumbled about the need to return here so often. He had over time taken this Holiday Inn as his permanent residence. The Washington townhouse had been abandoned with the front window left wide open to afford the faunae of the area suitable shelter for their continuous thriving. He was certain something would survive the great change taking place.

Understand, America was fucked. But anybody who had been paying attention knew that already. Martling thought what was required of all decent folk was to ease the transition into a post-human planet. Yes, America: open your windows and doors to let the critters of the world enter! You would not be needing your domiciles for much longer anyway.

In the weeks that Martling had left between visits to the aviary, it was his intention to write a manifesto stating this exactly. It was his intention to

email the finished copy to President Trump for further dissemination unto the American people. He felt at a very deep level this made perfect sense. No, it wasn't merely the endotoxins streaming through his body that was triggering such thoughts. He thought he was enlightened actually, inadvertently blessed by his illness with a knowledge of the way things were. The decades of booze had killed his body but liberated his spirit. And in a way a type of relief from suffering was gained by the events that started in Iowa, at least on a personal level. He was taking no medicine to help forestall his body poisoning itself. He figured it might all be over within a few weeks. His living will was already safely filed with a Cedar Lake attorney. It was simply a matter of playing out the string with him and finding his way out to the median daily.

His room was on the hotel's fourth floor, overlooking the turgid brown river Mike Kay had told him about on his first visit years back.

"I want to lay down, stare at the ceiling but with my shoes on," he said to G.I. Hung who had been carrying him around after he had started to crumple in the elevator. The bed was freshly made, and G.I. placed him on the comforter. The comforter was printed with a tableau showing the sites of Cedar Lake. Railroad town more than a river town, Cedar Lake. This was according to the tableau, as it showed a series of wooden buildings being constructed around the Union Pacific line. The line had been running freight since 1880. This part of Iowa never had a pre-agrarian phase, according to the comforter. The main products being loaded onto an open railcar right around the comforter's bottom right edge were swine and human labor. The latter was off to the factories in Chicago and St. Louis, laden with handkerchiefs full of food produced from the same family farms they grew up on.

Wonder what one of these Bohunks might think about what happened to their state in the hundred forty years since. Chief Hung wondered this certainly as he watched John Martling settle in for the day. Many of those nineteenth century families likely had just arrived in Iowa by the time their youngest members were compelled to relocate once again. To them, such transience likely was neither normal nor abnormal. Merely, it was a bit of wilfulness on the part of the American demiurge that one must accept without question. These were likely faith-based people and equipped with notions of inevitability that the present-day sufferers of the universe's caprice were mostly bereft of. Which made these latter-day drifters likely suffer even more (though, admittedly, it was hard to make such a comparison). In the Old Country, the end came in fits and starts through disease or privation. Once in America the end came more subtly, elongated over years because of access to modern medicine and a reliable food supply. In the old days, a worker might lose an arm or leg in a factory and waste away in a charity ward. In the early twenty-first century, he died in a nursing home or in hospice care. The purpose of such institutions was to shield the suffering of the terminally ill from public view. In modern-day Iowa there were neither famines nor rampaging Cossacks. There was, however, an enormous yawning indifference concerning the lot of First World peasants. Perhaps information-age American aristocrats, the lords and ladies of Silicon Valley and Wall Street, thought the First World peasant had it too good. Their unstated political goal was to reinstitute the suffering that their noble antecedents had brought to bear on the poor for centuries. It was debatable whether life was better for the peasantry nowadays. Once in America, a given corn husker's progeny was stuck here. He

likely lacked a notion of what he had gotten himself into until it was too late. Maybe he knew but assumed an upward trajectory of life. God loved him and also loved America, he thought. He would have been bitterly disappointed, therefore, to see a great black dragon emerge from the sun.

Martling wanted protections from the nightmare on going outside. He wanted to sleep peacefully. So, Hung closed the drapes and turned the TV on to drown out any extraneous information from the outside world.

The boob tube's information drip upset John more than it should have given his views about the world's end. Maybe unconsciously, he was still afraid for his life. Minutes before, he claimed he couldn't sleep until the drapes were closed and the TV on. Now he claimed he couldn't sleep under any circumstance.

The empty bottles of Tanqueray were ported out of the room with every cleaning. But there was still one unopened in the bathroom and John requested that it be brought to him along with a glass.

"It's just medicine to me. I don't get any sort of buzz at all anymore," he said to Hung. He was propped up on the bed's comforter with multiple pillows under his head and an ever-shifting countenance due to the images from the boob tube bouncing off his pale face.

Fox News was the default channel the tube was set to. Presently it was reporting on a series of simultaneous great ape die-offs at American zoos. Most of the die-offs were orangs. But there were some chimps and even (in Cincinnati) a gorilla. They all had died yesterday exactly at 4:45 PM eastern time. Each creature had emitted a scream and fell over dead. The autopsies performed on these unfortunate creatures had proven inconclusive. Of

course, they had proven inconclusive. Of course, nothing would be learned from any scientific investigation except that *life was mysterious and that we were all living through mysterious times*. A tagline stating that would eventually be uttered by the Fox reporter: *Bret, the scientific consensus is that life is mysterious, and we are experiencing a mysterious age*. *Back to you*. The coverage was prefabricated and repeated ad nauseum throughout the day's news cycle*. Life is mysterious and we are living through mysterious times*. Thanks, info-creeps. In fact, this line was created by the CIA, black site tested on the tortured, then disseminated to the media for purposes of crowd control. The entire media-propaganda complex (which included the CIA and FBI) was at sea nowadays when attempting a summation. Words failed these brainwashers routinely. Their efforts at mass indoctrination had proved wanting of late, devoid as they were of a coherent doctrine to wield against the ignorant masses. Their hearts weren't in it any longer, scared shitless as they were. Only the most elite of media members would be allowed into the Utah salt mine, apparently. This was a mistake, as constantly corporate reporters were presently going off-script on a live feed and speaking their minds. This Fox reporter, for example, had, just after repeating the CIA tag, placed her microphone at her side. She was staring dead-ahead now and crying silently. Even lying had proven too taxing for her at this latter-day hour. And, let's face it, lying was what the modern media was all about.

Banjo was the name of the Cincinnati-based gorilla. For some reason this was the creature the public, that was to say, the info-creeps, had fixated on. This was the creature absorbing sympathy at ten times the rate of either the chimps or the orangs.

“Gorillas lack a frontal lobe which is the same as a soul,” Martling said to Hung. He was fishing for reasons why a dead gorilla was more sympathetic than a dead chimp. “If you don’t have a soul,” he said, “you’re innocent of so many crimes in the eyes of others,” he said. “It’s only with self-knowledge that true evil becomes possible. I think the dumber you are, the more God loves you,” he said. “Men were better off living as apes in a boreal forest. It’s when we hit the African plain when all the trouble started for us,” he said. “In my opinion that’s when our fate was sealed.”

Banjo the gorilla was cute and dumb. Whereas the chimps in particular were cunning and dangerous. They seemed to know something was in the air. They had been deeply anxious for the better part of a year. At the Detroit Zoo, they had once as a group tried to make a break for it. They were tranquilized and put in solitary. And their exhibition closed to the public for good.

“It’ll all be over in four months, tops,” he said to Hung in between gulps of gin. “We have a supercomputer at the NSA that made the calculation,” he said. “About the sun’s death. They made the calculation to a probability of eighty percent. “Don’t ask me for the details, they have a calculation that they’re eighty percent certain about. So, you see, I’m one of the lucky ones. I’m getting out just in time.”

Martling couldn’t even taste the gin he was swilling. He took two ounce pulls from the glass so rapidly it would be impossible for an observer to tell if it was gin or water that he was slurping. It was like he was a desert traveler recently introduced to the nectar of an oasis cistern. He seemed to slurp as an involuntary response. There was not a bit of enjoyment to it. There was merely an attempt to quench an internal fire.

He would pass out eventually and be grateful for the oblivion.

G.I. Hung found the spectacle sad and troubling. Enough so that he turned away from the bed and towards the boob tube's chromatic glow. If he had the clicker, he would have changed the channel to something more soothing than the news. He didn't need to be reminded at eight-minute intervals about what was ongoing in the world. He could look outside the goddamn window and stare up at the sky to be assured that the world was fucked. From television, he required merely escape.

Sitting in the desk chair, Hung wondered how soon it would be before he could get up and leave John Martling to his oblivion.

"Lookit," he said to Helen Dice who had called his cell not several minutes after he sat down. "It ain't my fault. It's his. He don't want to live anymore. And I'm telling you: who can really blame him? I'm not judging him, but I done everything I can for him. There ain't a hotel doctor on call who can see to him like in the old days," he said to her. "No, that would be too much. I can call down to the desk clerk and have him wrap on his door come morning. It's the most they'd be willing to do for him now," he said. "It ain't like in the old days," he told Helen, recalling once a stay in a swanky resort he and his now ex-wife made years ago. "People don't give a shit about one another like they used to. And so many people nowadays are just left to fend for themselves."

As per G.I.'s instructions, Helen had called him to report a change in Fuzzy's behavior. This had happened minutes after Dr. Rinkley had left their presence. There were red marks still on Fuzzy's temple left by the phrenologist's callipers. But they seemed to have nothing to do with the source of Fuzzy's distress.

“He’s hearing things going on outside,” Helen told the Chief. “He’s staring through the wall as if he’s got x-ray vision. Also,” she said of her son, “he’s fixing to do himself some harm. He don’t say how or why, of course. But I know the signs from his former life. He’s punching himself in the face every now and again. He never sleeps. He’s looking around for something to stab himself with. I had to take the scissors right out his hand before it was too late. It happened all of a sudden. Maybe within the past hour. Like he got a signal from a spaceship or something to go execute Plan B.”

On Fox News, there was a breaking report testifying to the same thing happening to a cluster of Returnees near Yellow Springs, Ohio. They were all intent on doing self-harm. The sheriff down there apparently had installed monitoring cameras in the Returnees’ domiciles likely as not violating their civil rights. But this allowed him to be on the front lines of reporting any sort of group behavior. This made him somebody the media could trust.

With mouths wide open the Returned of the Midwest were uttering a silent prayer. Or perhaps a silent condemnation of the surrounding universe. As ever they were facing towards Detroit, towards the silent factories of the region and the millions of displayed souls who though not Returned yet themselves were good as zombified. Eventually their jaws would open wide enough to split the connective tendons. Their caretakers would run into the street begging for relief from social services. Of course, it was too late. The fact that the media reported it at all had everything to do with an endless news cycle where a constant information stream was required. The sheriff near Yellow Springs had already been denounced by the national media as a buffoon. But they put him on anyway because he had information to provide.

Now in an unconscious stupor, Martling shifted on the bed, revealing that he had soiled his trousers in the time between he was placed down on the comforter and when he had passed out.

“I ain’t got no advice for you,” G.I. said to Helen, “except to do as you see fit.”

Rev. Nan Kramer was on another line, having whipped herself insensate with an extension cord. Delusional because of the pain, she was wishing to confess to somebody. Chief didn't have time for her either. He knew it was too late for any of that Catholic school shit. He knew the Creator of this World was inured to confession.

Now, if not always. Chief Hung closed his eyes and thought of the Hmong homeland somewhere in Laos. As a dragon the size of Greenland approached earth, he knew he would not see it again.

--The End

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About the Author

David Miller is the author of *Little Ethiopia*, *Death Trip*, and *Gut Bucket Blues*. This is his eighth novel. There is little you don’t know about him that he doesn’t know about himself.